Theorising hospitality

Harry Potter and metaphysical hospitality

Continuing the series of investigations of hospitality practices in different locations, **Kevin O'Gorman** and **David Brooks** explore what muggles can learn from the hospitality experienced in the world of wizardry. These epic fantasies have some mind-expanding messages for those who will listen.

Hospitality has always appeared in literature throughout the ages. In Classical Antiquity, for instance, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the centrality of hospitality, and its importance cannot be underestimated.[1] There are at least 18 hospitality scenes in the works of Homer; these are central to his storytelling technique.[2] Homer's original audience may well have believed in the existence and reality of gods like Zeus and Hera or monstrous beings such as the Cyclops and Charybdis; however, they knew he was telling a story. In the case of the recently completed Harry Potter series, hospitality permeates all the seven books to the extent that it almost goes unnoticed: from cups of tea in Hagrid's house, to shared butterbeers in the Three Broomsticks, and feasting in the Great Hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Storytelling

Storytelling involves the suspension of disbelief. Even the most grittily realistic of thrillers requires readers to accept fictional people and circumstances, however plausible and otherwise convincing their plot lines and characterisations might be. It is in the nature of fiction to expect and to accept things that are not part of reality. Some stories stick quite closely to what we know, requiring only a small amount of disbelief to be suspended. Authors like J R R Tolkien, C S Lewis and J K Rowling oblige their readers to take giant leaps into the unknown and accept, more or less on face value, things that are not part of physical reality. These magical and metaphysical environments are very similar to those of the most enduringly popular and respected works of literature through the ages: the gods and monsters of the ancient world;[3] the moral imperatives of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic scriptures and their subsequent teachings;[4] the deities and devils of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, and the ghosts and goblins of Shakespeare's plays.

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Only since the era of the Enlightenment, and the rise of rationalism—with its rigid view of a nature governed by intractable rules—has the written word been straitjacketed by very clear ideas of just what is and is not physically possible. Imagination and a refusal to take things at face value play a big part in scientific understanding and discovery. For instance the King James Bible, first published in 1611, refers several times to the unicorn, while dragons were often

hunted in the Dark Ages. The ability to take an imaginative leap beyond accepted scientific dogma and the entrenched views of academic colleagues, disciplinary boundaries or even apparent common sense has been at the heart of a significant number of scientific or technological advances in the last few hundred years. For example, throughout most of the 20th century, the conventional wisdom was that peptic ulcers were caused by gastric juice. Only by a pioneering doctor infecting himself with a bacterium (*Helicobacter pylori*) could he prove that conventional wisdom was incorrect and win the Nobel Prize for medicine.[5] This is true even for advances that seem to be based on objective fact or cold hard logic, as the physicist Max Planck said:

> *New ideas are not generated by deduction, but by an artistically creative imagination ... Science, like the humanities, like literature, is an affair of the imagination.*[6]

By encouraging readers to imagine a world in which hard science is not all there is, storytellers have made it both possible and legitimate to question whether the scientism of the Enlightenment must be taken at face value. This is an interesting development since, in many sectors of our society, science is seen as being little short of infallible—as having all the answers. As a result, generations have grown up with the assumption that anything else must be dismissed as fancy.

Even in research publications there is the tendency to trust the so-called 'hard facts' of statistically analysed quantitative data rather than the interpretive results that qualitative analysis tends to produce. However, the physicist Richard Feynman warned his students that when they did research, and before publishing their results, they should think of every possible way in which they might be wrong. Another physicist, Alan Lightman, explains the vital importance of this self-questioning approach: 'In science, as in other activities, there is a tendency to find what we're looking for.'[7]

Virtually any piece of text, any sign, any object that has caused reflection, tells a story; indeed, the failure to tell a story is a story in its own right

Stories and research

What differentiates man from creatures on the earth is that he is a storytelling animal: sees the present rising out of a past, heading into a future; perceives reality in narrative form.[8] The methodology of storytelling has evolved to such an extent that

> *it is now widely agreed that stories are part of a sense-making process that can be researched in situ, without that burdensome requirement of social-science research—the need to establish the validity of claims, the facts behind allegations, the truth behind the tales. For, as it has been widely argued, the truth of a story lies not in the facts, but in the meaning. If people believe a story, if the story grips them, whether events actually happened or not, is irrelevant. It is for the pedant or the unreconstructed positivist to question poetic licence, seeking to convert storytelling into testimony.*[9]

Modernism questioned the survival of stories; postmodernism sees stories everywhere.[10] Postmodernism has reinvented stories, beyond the dreams of the most ardent folklorists. If narratives are favoured objects of postmodern discourses, stories are favoured among narratives. Virtually any piece of text, any sign, any object that has caused reflection, tells a story; indeed, the failure to tell a story is a story in its own right.

> *The storyteller fails or succeeds in proportion to the amusement he affords. His motifs may be plucked from the tree of the mythological order. His productions have to be judged, at last, not as science, sociology, psychology, or metaphysics, but as art.*[11]

Stories may be entertaining, but they also have other functions: they stimulate the imagination and offer reassurance;[12] they provide moral education;[13] they justify and explain;[14] they inform, advise and warn;[15] but folklorists are adamant that, when seen in the practice of storytelling, stories were above all else recreational:

> *Researchers who want to use stories as a research instrument must be prepared to sacrifice at least temporarily some of the core values of their craft and adopt instead a rather alien attitude towards their subjects and their texts. They must rid themselves of the assumption that quality data must be objective, reliable, accurate, etc. and must be prepared to*

engage personally with the emotions and the meanings that reside in the text.[16]

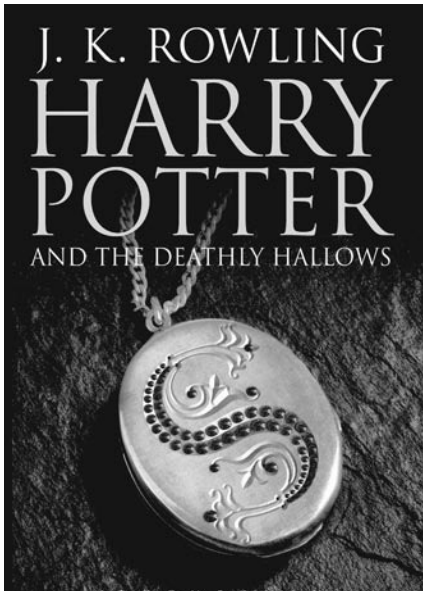
Stories and experience are linked in postmodern discourses. Not only do stories transform into experience, but experience turns into stories:

> *If we listen carefully to the talk around, it is not difficult to think that storytelling goes on almost nonstop. People transform their lives and their experiences into stories with practised ease.*[17]

Narrative emerges as the privileged form of sensemaking, as 'the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful.'[18] These ideas are now explored using the Harry Potter stories, examining what they say about hospitality.

The Harry Potter saga

J K Rowling wrote the seven-volume fantasy series about an adolescent boy wizard named Harry Potter and his best friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. The story is mostly set at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and focuses on Harry Potter's fight against the evil wizard Lord Voldemort, who killed Harry's parents as part of his plan to take over the wizarding world. It is easy to draw a number of analogies between a wide range of literature, both classical and modern, including Homer, Shakespeare and C S Lewis.



However, since the publication of the last book Harry has even been compared to Jesus Christ. One commentator in *Newsweek* notes that Harry dies and then comes back to life to save mankind, pointing out that the title of the chapter in which this occurs is King's Cross. In the scene in which Harry is temporarily dead, they point out that it places Harry in a very heaven-like setting where he talks to a father figure 'whose supernatural powers are accompanied by a profound message of love.'[19] This argument could be strengthened by the biblical quotation on the gravestone of Harry's parents: 'And the last enemy that shall be defeated is death', (1 *Corinthians* 15:26) which refers to Christ's resurrection.

Criticism from religious groups regarding the books stems largely from those who assert that the Harry Potter stories also contain occult or even satanic subtexts. However, it could be said that their criticism may also stem from certain individuals' inability to suspend their disbelief and even a lack of imagination—after all, fundamentally, it is just a children's story. Marx once said that religion was 'the opium of the people';[20] it could be claimed that fantasy literature, and in particular the cult of Harry Potter has taken the place of religion. After the publication of *The Hobbit*, J R R Tolkien argued that if fantasy and fairy stories were escapist, the real problem was not so much the fantasy as the reality that people so clearly felt a need to escape from:

> *Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls?*[21]

folklorists are adamant that, when seen in the practice of storytelling, stories were above all else recreational

Despite attempts to give the books spurious deeper meanings, since the publication of the first novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997, the books have gained immense popularity, critical acclaim and commercial success worldwide, leading to films, video games, theme parks and merchandise. The seven books published have collectively sold more than 325m copies and have been translated into more than 64 languages, including Ancient Greek and Latin.[22] The seventh and last book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, was released in July 2007. Publishers announced a record-breaking 12m copies for the first print run in the US alone.[23] Reputedly, the success of the novels has made J K Rowling the highest-earning novelist in history.[24]

Hospitality and Harry Potter

Hospitality pervades the entire seven books; it exists in the home, at school and there is even a commercial sector. The first character in the books is a Vernon Dursley: he is Harry Potter's uncle, and despises all things magical,[25] especially his nephew (by marriage, not blood).[26] He and his wife have grudgingly raised Harry from an early age, denying him any information about the magical world.[27]

Unlike his wife who seems to have a slight feeling of familial loyalty to Harry, Vernon seems to hate his nephew so much that he was willing to throw him out of the house, knowing that doing so would put him in grave danger.[28] It was however the churlishly given hospitality in his Uncle's house that offered Harry the most protection.[29] Ironically for a fictional character, Vernon also has an aversion to imagination, or to any references to magic, or anything even slightly out of the ordinary.[30] The other domestic home which afforded Harry hospitality and thus provides him with safety and security is the Weasleys' house, located in a village, which is also the home of other magical families.[31] The seven-floored house is dilapidated, and it manages to remain standing only by magic. Despite the house's rundown appearance, Harry remarks on his first visit that it was the best house he had ever been in and it comes to be his second favourite place in the world (after Hogwarts).

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a boarding school for witches and wizards between the ages of 11 and 18 living in the UK and Ireland; there are at least two other schools of magic. Students at Hogwarts are divided into four houses, as the deputy head notes:

> *your House will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your House, sleep in your House dormitory, and spend free time in your House common room.*

It is the shared hospitality that the students experience within their houses that condition them for later life.[32]

Great emphasis is also placed on communal eating and feasting; the day is structured around meals in the great hall.[33] Students sit at their own house table and can eat as well as socialise or finish homework. The headmaster eats with the teaching staff at the high table at the far end of the hall.

Food is particularly interesting in the magical world as it is one of the five principal exceptions to Gamp's law of elemental transfiguration, and is thus one of the few objects that cannot be created by magic.[34] While it is known that some cooks seemingly create sauces from their wand, it is possible that the sauces are temporary:

> *One of the four celebrated Founders of Hogwarts, Hufflepuff was particularly famous for her dexterity at food-related Charms.*[35]

Many recipes traditionally served at Hogwarts feasts originated with Hufflepuff.[36] Another more probable explanation is that the sauce is being transferred from a different location and pouring from the wand. Also, through the use of the spells, drinkable water can be produced, as well as tea, coffee and pumpkin juice, although perhaps all are transported from elsewhere.[37]

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Nevertheless, particularly in Hogwarts, a great deal of food production depends upon house-elves.[38] House-elves spend their whole lives serving one family or institution; unless they are freed (which many house-elves view as shameful), their descendants will carry on their tasks. Though their condition shares similarities with human slaves,[39] house-elves take pride in their hard work and fear being set free,[40] and some appear to be happy in their bondage, while their subservience guarantees their status as second-class citizens in the wizarding world.[41]

A house-elf's strongest law is their master's bidding: this highlights a very clear ownership of hospitality resources and the books give many examples of the abuse of the elves.[42] Hundreds of house-elves work at Hogwarts. Like most house-elves, the Hogwarts house-elves feel that it is a matter of pride to serve well without complaint and to work hard. Harry Potter and his friends often enter the kitchens of Hogwarts to meet with the house-elves, who seem pleased with

their company and eagerly bring them food.

The house-elves at Hogwarts are skilled chefs, and cook a wide variety of dishes for every meal.[43] The food served at the school is fresh and grown locally; the school has vegetable patches by the greenhouses. The meats and other condiments are probably bought in from Hogsmeade village, and the various dishes are prepared in the kitchens directly below the great hall and, at meal times, are magically transported up so that they appear served for the students. Hogwarts food is typically British, although the school sometimes makes exceptions where the hospitality is deliberately focused on the guests, to put them at ease; for example, during the Triwizard Tournament, foreign dishes, such as bouillabaisse, were served in honour of the visiting schools. The Triwizard tournament is a centuries-old inter-school competition and one of the key hospitality activities associated with this is the Yule ball.[44] However, this occasion serves to highlight the jealousy of one's peers that subsists within most adolescent relationships, and shows how hospitable situations can highlight and develop socialisation skills.[45]

The first mention of commercial hospitality comes in the first book with 'The Leaky Cauldron', an inn for wizards, offering food, drinks and accommodation.[46] It was founded by Daisy Dodderidge (1467–1555) in 1500 'to serve as a gateway between the non-wizarding world and Diagon Alley'. Diagon Alley is effectively a main wizarding High Street and 'The Leaky Cauldron' links it to Charing Cross Road.[47] There are a number of rooms available; Harry has stayed in Room 11, which has a talking mirror and windows that allow him to look out onto Charing Cross Road. The inn also has a bar, several private rooms and a large dining room. 'The Leaky Cauldron' is used as a base for visits to London on shopping trips; there is no mention of other wizarding hotels or inns in Diagon Alley. As such, commercial hospitality serves both as a bridge and a barrier between the magical world and muggle London.

When at school, on designated weekends, Hogwarts students in their third year or higher, with a signed permission slip, are permitted to walk to the nearby wizarding village of Hogsmeade, where they can relax and enjoy the pubs, restaurants and shops.[48] There appears to be a good relationship between the school and the village, and the students get on well with the locals. Favourite places in Hogsmeade include Madame Puddifoot's tea shop and the inns: 'The Three Broomsticks' and 'The Hog's Head.'

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'The Three Broomsticks' is one of the local inns in Hogsmeade, renowned for its delicious butterbeer[49] and a favourite inn among Hogwarts students and staff. 'The Hog's Head' is another pub, which often attracts a more unusual and private clientele than 'The Three Broomsticks', and many of the customers hide their faces.[50] The hanging sign on the front of the pub has a severed boar's head, leaking blood onto the white cloth around it. The pub itself is filthy, with the floor covered with layers of dirt, and the windows smeared with so much grime that little light gets through. The main floor is a single room, but there are additional rooms on the upper floors. Harry notes that the pub smells strongly of goats. Despite its seedy reputation, 'The Hog's Head' hosted several significant events in the world of Harry Potter, highlighting the importance of commercial hospitality establishments in general.

Hospitality lessons from Harry Potter

This article has looked at the fundamentals of story-telling and then storytelling as research—in particular the importance of escaping from the purely scientific and moving into the realm of metaphysics. The Harry Potter saga can be used to enlighten hospitality research, as like any other story-telling literature it is full of hospitality incidents. The examples identified,

and the many others contained in the seven novels, illustrate a great many hospitality truths in the wizarding universe, which readily apply to muggles too.

Closed minds and prejudice can act as a barrier to hospitality; however, even when hospitality is unwillingly given it still affords sanctuary and security. This is clearly illustrated in Harry's relationship with his uncle and his uncle's relationship with the rest of the wizarding world. On the other extreme, taking advantage of or abusing the other or the host's hospitable nature can quickly lead to the gift of hospitality being taken for granted, clearly shown in the abuse of the house-elves.

Hospitality, when shared between the guest and host, engenders thoughts of happiness and feelings of contentment; this is evident when Harry is living at the Burrow. However it can also: lead to a greater cooperation between different nationalities (an aim of the triwizard tournament); further relationships, establish ties and fraternal bonds; and even clear the air between friends. Shared experience in a hospitable situation can open the other's mind to a new way of thinking, and also helps to increase trust. Behaviour changes where there is prospect of hospitality: for example, the prospect of being a host leads to increased efforts to present a positive image of oneself, shown in the cleaning of Hogwarts prior to other schools arriving and the prospect of a Yule ball or a feast sends a buzz round the entire school.

Socialisation and education, sometimes from one's peers, leads to an improvement in a hospitable attitude. Throughout the books, hospitality is rich in symbolism and it is often learned behaviour, but it transcends both culture and tradition, in the physical world and in the metaphysical world. The wizarding universe is utterly separate from our own, existing on a metaphysical plane, however yet intimately connected with our own; it is this verisimilitude that helps to make such fantasy writing believable.

Most importantly, this exploration of hospitality in Harry Potter's world has highlighted that when undertaking research, the researcher should be open to what is evident in the data and not resemble Harry's Uncle Vernon when faced with impossibility he '

> *hurried to his car and set off home, hoping he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn't approve of imagination.*[51]

As Shakespeare's Hamlet tells Horatio '

> *There are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*
>
> (*Hamlet* Act 1 Scene v)

Picture credits

The adult cover of the latest and final Harry Potter novel: design William Webb, images Michael Wildsmith, © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc; J K Rowling photograph © Richard Young Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

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