Current Contents

Past Issues

Reading *Harry Potter*: A personal and collective experience

Abstract

How is Harry Potter linked to the personal histories of young readers? How have these readers built their reading expectations and satisfactions? Are there many differences in their reading activities and interests? This paper presents research carried out between 2005 and 2006 in France that is intended to throw light on the reception of the Harry Potter novels in France.

First, it focuses on the public reception of Harry Potter in media discourses: "media talk" has shaped an image of the Harry Potter readership and ascribed meanings to the novels. On the one hand, in the mainstream press, both the evolution of the characters and the "effects" of the novels on young readers have been interpreted according to a single set of psychological and psychoanalytical references. On the other, the generic labels used to describe the novels and the movies have varied according to the gender and to cultural resources of the readership targeted. These discursive frames have helped to define specific reading expectations: Did they affect actual readers? How have these readers built their own personal history with Harry Potter?

Second, this paper presents the results of a sociological investigation mainly based on biographical interviews with Harry Potter readers: 29 readers from different social backgrounds, aged 16 to 24, were interviewed, and their particular reading experiences are analysed in the light of several statistical surveys about teenagers' reading practices in France. The analysis focuses on the differences between the "reading careers" and the modes of reception of the readers interviewed: this paper shows how readers' personal histories with Harry Potter depend on their cultural socialization and sociabilities, and it explores the complexity of their modes of reception, which combine analytical and emotional dimensions.

Keywords: Harry Potter, reading practice, reception, socialization

The wide success of Harry Potter in France testifies both to a process of literary *commodification* and to the popularity of literary print culture. According to sales figures and statistical surveys, the Harry Potter

readership seems to be very diverse, blurring some traditional age, gender or social distinctions related to reading preferences.

Our research interest was to investigate how these very heterogeneous readers made sense of the books and organized their Harry Potter "reading career." This paper will be, more precisely, an attempt to analyse the diversity of the Harry Potter reading experiences of teenagers and young adults in France. It will draw upon primary research conducted between October 2005 and December 2006, using two main methods. First, a textual analysis of media discourses focused on the cultural meanings and effects ascribed to this reading practice, and second, biographical and focus group interviews with young readers (29 teenagers and young adults, aged from 16 to 24, from diverse social backgrounds in Lyon and Paris) allow us to understand their personal histories as Harry Potter readers.

The discursive frames around Harry Potter and the public image of its readership

Sources and methods of discourse analysis

We have tried to avoid the intellectualist bias of the academic discourse privileging the most analytic and erudite forms of reception, or the most articulate and literary forms of newspaper reviews (Barker, 2004). As Elizabeth Long pointed out, "the traditional imagery of the solitary reader" has privileged "a certain kind of reading: erudite, analytic" (Long, 2003, p. 2-3), and it "legitimat[es] only certain kinds of literary values and certain modes of reading" (p. 11). We also tried to avoid an exclusive focus on the experience of fans and experts. As Jonathan Gray (2003, p. 67) wrote, "the turn to in-depth audience research has often assumed the form of fan research. It served an important role in understanding media consumption but it often focused on a single particular type of involvement with the media text." There were, of course, practical and methodological reasons for that particular research agenda, as Henry Jenkins observed: "fan interpretations are more accessible to analysis, more available for observation than the transitory meanings produced by non-fan viewers" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 286). Yet, recent studies of fandom have focused on differences, nuances, and even contradictions and clashes within fandom. We tried to catch a glimpse of the broad variety of interaction occurring between the Harry Potter books and their readers.

The Harry Potter books are characterized by their serial publication over ten years, their dispersion on different media and tie-ins, and their symbolic status as best-sellers and objects of public attention: all these elements have shaped reading experiences. Harry Potter has, indeed, had a massive and long-lasting public existence well before each volume was published. Martin Barker emphasized the importance of the secondary, ancillary, or satellite texts that shape in advance the conditions under which

interpretations of novels are formed: marketing campaigns, articles, reviews and debates in the media, and fan productions (Barker, 2004).

All these public discourses constitute discursive frames around the novels. They tend to ascribe meanings and effects to the Harry Potter books and to spread a homogeneous and sometimes simplistic image of Harry Potter readers.

Public discourses about Harry Potter reading

We interviewed readers between the publishing of the sixth and seventh Harry Potter book, and between the release of the fourth and fifth Harry Potter movie. Much of the media talk was then generated by the release of the movies.

In the media, the same psychological and psychoanalytical frame tended to be used not only to explain the evolution of the characters but also to account for the evolution of the readers. This pervasive interpretation was mostly fixed in 2001-2002 after the publication of the first two Harry Potter volumes in French. Three books played a major role as a resource for stabilizing this discursive frame: *Harry Potter. Les raisons d'un succès (Harry Potter. The Reasons of a Success)* by the philosopher and psychoanalyst Isabelle Smadja (Smadja, 2001); *L'enchantement Harry Potter. La psychologie de l'enfant nouveau* (*The Harry Potter Enchantment. The New Child's Psychology*), by the psychologist Benoît Virole (Virole, 2001); and *The Whispering of Ghosts: Trauma and Resilience,* by the psychoanalyst Boris Cyrulnik (Cyrulnik, 2005). The first and the second of these books refer to Bruno Bettelheim, to Freud, and to Harry's Oedipus complex. The authors use the narrative model of the fairy tale or *Bildungsroman* to describe the Harry Potter books as an "an initiatory voyage to become an adult." They assert that "Harry Potter presents the interior psychological conflicts of every child and contribute in helping the readers to overcome them, as Harry has overcome the traumatic murder of his parents." Harry Potter was also described as a case of "resiliency," a widely called-upon resource and a hot topic, culturally relevant at the time, particularly developed by the psychoanalyst Boris Cyrulnik.

Although the Harry Potter readership is much wider, the readers who were mostly described were teenagers. Assumptions about teenagers' emotional instability, vulnerability, and identity crises have influenced many of the categories used in media discourse to talk about Harry Potter. Reading Harry Potter was supposed to contribute to the harmonious maturation of the readers, as the characters themselves were growing up. The mechanism of this readers' transformation was supposed to be "identification": "the rhetorical use of this concept fitted well in this general discursive frame insofar as it

draws upon behavioural psychology and popular psychoanalysis, and belongs to a domain of thought concerned with audiences' vulnerability" (Barker, 2005, p. 354).

The recurrence of these abstract and general psychological categories ("identification," "resiliency," "adolescence" as a normative crisis) contributed to creating a standardized and homogenous image and interpretation of the books' readers and characters. This scientific and psychological interpretation held sway as the most authorized and legitimate discourse, and it played an important role in turning Harry Potter into a part of legitimate and safe culture. This interpretation tends to infer the psychological processes at play in reading from a content analysis and to privilege the perception of a quite homogenous and invariant "personal development" of the readers. The interest of a sociological work is precisely to depart from such a model of individual psychological effects and to throw light on the differences and variations in the reception of Harry Potter and on the social nature of this reception.

Beyond these kinds of general assertions about Harry Potter, usually aimed at adults, the media discourses were not so monolithic, particularly in movie and teenagers' magazines. The fourth and fifth movies saw a shift in the critical comments and a greater diversity of generic labels and frames applied to Harry Potter: a blockbuster, a "*film d'auteur,*" a teenage movie, a romantic comedy, a heroic-fantasy movie, a trash film. Several articles pointed to the "psychologization" of Harry, a fairy-tale hero who became a rebellious teenager. In teenagers' magazines targeting boys, the articles focused on the magic tricks, the characters' powers and fights, the fictional universe, or the special effects in the movies. Magazines targeting girls tended to put forward the private lives of the actors of the movies, the sentimental relationships, and the different "couples" in the movies and the novels. These ancillary discourses targeting teenagers were thus clearly gendered, and the labels applied to the movies and the novels can help to define a diversity of reading expectations. But do actual readers conform to these solicitations? How do they appropriate the novels? How do their reading experiences relate to their movie experiences with Harry Potter?

Harry Potter readers' trajectories of reception and modes of appropriation

Research methods and population investigated

This research was an attempt to analyse both the diversity of appropriation of the novels and the diversity of readers' personal trajectories and histories with Harry Potter. The publishing of the seven volumes spread out over almost 10 years, so this reading practice has accompanied the readers' school, personal, and family trajectories at a time when they were building up their cultural dispositions and tastes.

First, the reception of the books was interpreted as the result of the readers' personal history and cultural socialization, in accordance with a sociology at the level of the individual (Lahire, 2003 & 2004). Second, the reception of a same book by readers from different social and cultural backgrounds throws light on significant differences in socialization and reception processes.

We tried to combine a focus on modes of reception and a focus on socialization processes through biographical interviews about the readers' personal histories with Harry Potter. There are indeed complex interactions between the evolution and maturation of the characters, the transformations of the readers, and the evolution of their reading skills and modes of reception over several years.

The readers belonged to the same age group, between 16 and 24 years old. According to the occupations, qualifications, and degrees of their parents, they are distributed among upper, middle, and lower social groups (see Table 1). Their school orientations and levels of attainment were also diverse: some were in general high schools, elite universities, or scientific or literary courses; others were in technological courses in areas targeted for special help in education, and some dropped out of the school system.

Table 1: Population of readers interviewed (social position, reading career, and mode of reception)

Upper class with cultural capital

Name	Age	Reading career	Mode of reception
Anne-Kathrin	20	a	1.a&1.c&2a
Claire-Sarah	21	b	1.c&2.b
Elise	23	c	2.b&2.c
Hannah	17	a	1.a&2.b
Marine	20	a	1.a&1.c&2.b
Thomas	17	a	1.a&1.b&2.b

Upper class with economic or intermediary capital

Cecilia	17	a	1.b&2.a.&2.b
Fanny	21	a	1.a&2.b
Hélène	21	b	1.a&1.b&2a
Hiro	24	a	1.a&2a
Lou	16	c	2.b
Lucie	21	a	1.a&1.b&1.c&1.d
Ugo	16	c	2.c

Middle class with cultural capital

Elise II	18	b	2.b
Julie	17	a	2.b
Marine II	17	b	2.b
Simon	21	b.	1.a&1.b&1.c&2a
Stéphanie	23	b	2.b
Thibault	17	a	1.a&1.b&2a

Middle class with intermediary or economic capital

Amandin	16	a	1.a&1.b&2a

Clausel	24	c	2.b
James	23	b	2.c
Kevin	18	a	1.a&1.b&2b
Sarah	18	a	2.c

Popular class

Aurélie	19	a.	1.a&2a
Carine	19	b	1.a&2.b
Céline	17	b	2.b
Marina	18	c	2.c
Nadège	17	c	2.c

Key: *Reading Career (first column):*

> a: early appropriation with parental supervision and intense reading practices

> b: a later or more difficult entry but a strong engagement

> c: a less intense appropriation linked to media prescription

Mode of reception (second column):

1. A series of analytic readings:

    1.a: a taste for investigation and "theories"

    1.b: the coherence of possible worlds

    1.c: an erudite attention to symbols

2. Cultures of feelings and ethical perceptions:

    2.a: a preference for adult or "bad" characters: the appeal of psychological complexity

    2.b: the appeal of love relations and a fascination with the actors

    2.c: "cool" engagement with the books

How does one read this table? Anne-Kathrin (first line): Her parents belong to the fraction of upper class more endowed with cultural capital than with economic capital (according to their qualification, degree, and occupation). Her "reading career" is characterized by an early and intense appropriation of the Harry Potter books, supervised by her parents ("a" in the first column), and her mode of reception combines (&) two analytic modes (1.a&1.c: construction of hypothesis and erudite attention to symbols) and an ethical mode (2.a: preference for adult characters and psychological complexity).

In a 2002 statistical survey, teenagers declared that Harry Potter was the book that had most "moved" them: it was placed by 44% of boys and 48% of girls in the first position, whereas the other choices and preferences were all very clearly gendered, with a feminine cluster around classical novels, psychological novels, biographies, and best-sellers (*Not Without My Daughter, Go Ask Alice, Bridget Jones, Anne Frank's Diary, Christiane F., Carrie*), and a masculine cluster around heroic fantasy, science fiction, (*Lord of the Rings, Star Wars*) and some comics (Détrez, 2007). More generally, according to a 1999 statistical

survey, in junior high schools, differences in reading practices and preferences were related first to gender and then to social position and school attainment. In high school, school attainment becomes the first differentiation factor, before gender and social position (Baudelot, Cartier & Détrez, 1999). Harry Potter was, then, read by teenagers whose cultural tastes and preferences were otherwise very differentiated according to gender, school attainment, and social position.

These readers were at the end of their high school years. According to a 1999 survey, high school entry and attendance is marked by a sharp decline in reading practices over three or four years, even for good students in elite courses, and particularly for boys in scientific courses. Due to the weight of French literature exams and classes, reading practices tend to be restricted to some compulsory French literary classics. Yet, after this exam, during the last year in high school, teenagers' reading practices and expectations tend to be more diversified and open to international and mostly American titles (e.g., Mary Higgins-Clark, Stephen King) (Baudelot, Cartier & Détrez, 1999).

The Harry Potter novels, by their wide and diverse readership, lent themselves very well to an investigation of the diversity of "appropriation" and levels of engagement. The analysis of the readers' trajectories and modes of reception (and the results as shown in Table 1) are not necessarily representative of all Harry Potter readers, but we wanted to explore intensively the reading experiences of a socially diverse population.

Trajectories of reception and cultural socialization

The chronology and the forms of prescription at play in readers' first encounter with Harry Potter, as well as the way these readers managed their "reading career," refer to differences in cultural socialisation in the family and at school (Mauger, Poliak & Pudal, 1999).

An early appropriation with parental supervision

The first group of readers experienced an early appropriation of Harry Potter, closely managed by their parents, who transmitted to them a taste for reading and a legitimate relationship with culture. They were offered the first volumes, often by their mother, but sometimes after one of their friends told them about Harry Potter, while they were in junior high school. This encounter occurred at a time when Harry Potter hadn't reached the symbolic status of a best-seller and a blockbuster, before the release and success of the first movies. It was then considered just a kind of interesting piece of British youth literature. For the parents, this present of a novel was not totally disconnected from pedagogical expectations and took place within a more general attempt to manage the cultural practices of their children through regular conversations, gifts, subscriptions, advice, and visits to libraries. Through this playful present, these

parents shared the expectation of a kind of scholastic profitability: they wanted to encourage their children to read, to acquire a taste for reading, and to improve their spelling and their English. The beginning of this group's reading career was shaped by a general parental supervision.

School prescriptions also played a part; some readers encountered Harry Potter in English classes, or even in French classes, in junior high school or during language courses in England. The curricula in English and French classes in grammar schools is less strictly organized around the teaching of analytic reading of French classical literature and leaves more space for international youth literature and teenagers' expectations.

Reading the Harry Potter volumes in English was strongly recommended by their parents and teachers, and this group of readers often privileges this original version. Their reading of the English and French versions of the book allow them a specific analytic mode of reception centred on a comparison of the stories, on an appraisal of the translation choices, and on an appreciation of the original language. They often have distinctive strategies in buying the books, not in a general bookstore or in a supermarket, but in an English bookstore in France or directly in the UK. For those readers, the stake is thus not only to improve their reading skills, but also to acquire more fluency in English and to learn to refer to the original version, and to pay attention to the style of writing and the translation.

These readers tend more firmly to perceive and appreciate Harry Potter in its British context and sometimes relate it to other "boarding school stories." Hence the appeal of the details of the school system in Poudlard and of the landscapes perceived as typically Scottish or English.

Other readers had access to the books through their younger brother and sisters, for whom the book was first intended, to improve their reading skills. Once the books were available at home, they were widely circulated, fuelling conversations and relations inside the family.

These early readers came mostly from a privileged social background, with high levels of cultural and school capital in their families, a taste for reading and for literature, and relative success at school. They have been constantly subjected to prescriptions to read classical literature in their family and at school. They have acquired an analytic disposition toward language and literacy, and sometimes a strong sense of the cultural legitimacy promoted by the school system and the cultural institutions. Some of these early Harry Potter readers are also great readers and have achieved a high level of attainment at school, often in elite schools or elite courses in university.

Anne-Kathrin, 20 (father: university professor; mother: university professor) and Marine, 20 (father: computer engineer; mother: primary school teacher) are students in literature and in English in a famous university, and they have integrated Harry Potter into their classical and legitimate cultural practices and

expectations. Their legitimate and intense reading practices shaped a specific horizon of expectations; they use the French literary category of "*merveilleux*" to describe Harry Potter and talk about J.K.Rowling's writing style. They also share a distaste for science fiction and heroic fantasy in literature or in cinema.

However, there are differences in the practices and reading pacts of these privileged readers that underline the differences within the upper and middle class according to the relative weight of culture and economic capital and, more generally, to transformations of the relations of these social groups with culture (Lizardo, 2006, p. 8).

Lucie, 21 (student; father: pharmacist; mother: nurse), and Helen, 21 (student; father: computer scientist; mother: laboratory assistant) have a similar sociocultural background, but their parents are less endowed with cultural capital. Their cultural tastes are less exclusively shaped by a sense of legitimate cultural investment. They privileged heroic fantasy novels over classical literature and have learnt to separate their compulsory reading from their personal reading, even if they have very good results in French. Lucy is a heroic fantasy fan. She has read and re-read *Lord of the Rings*. Helen's favourite books are also Harry Potter and *Lord of the Rings,* and she attached great value to the coherence of possible worlds. Other readers have also a mode of reception shaped by their previous heroic fantasy readings.

This group's appropriation of the Harry Potter world is first and foremost acquired from the books. These readers have thus acquired a cultural disposition to express, explicit, formalize and put into words their interpretation, reading experiences and emotions.

A later or more difficult entry but a strong engagement

Other readers had access later to the Harry Potter novels, through the advertising campaign at the time the Harry Potter movies were released. They started reading the novels after seeing one of the movies. They sometimes experienced difficulties in reading but engaged themselves in an intensive and continuous reading practice and reading career and often privileged the novels over the movies. The movie helped them at the beginning to "enter into" the books. Some of these readers had access to the books through their younger brother and sisters, for whom the book was first intended, to improve their reading skills. They were thus not directly encouraged by their parents, but the Harry Potter books constituted a kind of family common culture. Once the books were available at home, they widely circulated, fuelling conversations and relations inside the family.

A less intense appropriation linked to media prescription

Another group of readers privileged the movies, and sometimes the video games, over the books, as a way of appropriating Harry Potter. They don't attach value to reading, do not read much, and then only best-sellers. Stephanie, 23 (student; father: business executive; mother: administrative employee), presents reading as a duty. Clausel, 24 (student; father: doctor; mother: teacher in primary school, in Ghana) has never read a Harry Potter volume entirely; he reads only the passages he preferred in the movies.

Some of these readers go to high schools in areas with special help in education and come from less privileged backgrounds; their parents did not study in the university and don't read much. Others come from middle- or upper-class families with economic capital.

This group of readers discovered Harry Potter much later, when the novels had become best-sellers and advertising surrounded the movies. The prescription at stake here is more linked to the media than to any parental or academic solicitation. Their parents often do not read much, their cultural practices revolving more exclusively around television, in part because of financial constraints. These readers experienced difficulties when they started reading the first volumes and seem more sensitive to media prescription.

Stephanie presents reading as a duty, a chore, and confesses that she is not a great reader: "I read a book when everybody around me talks about it. I read like that all the books by Marc Levy." She hardly remembers the titles and authors of the few books she has read and doesn't use literary parameters to identify and describe a book. She finds it easier to see Harry Potter movies than to read again the books. Elise, 23 (unemployed, studied to be a hairdresser; father: technology teacher; mother: teacher), also reads best-sellers: *The Da Vinci Code, Perfume*. She prefers the movies and DVDs to the books. Clausel discovered Harry Potter with the release of the first movie. He reads only after he has seen the movie. He has never read a book entirely, but he chooses to read the passages he preferred in the movies, and he borrows the books from his 7-year-old cousin.

The privileged medium of their Harry Potter appropriation is not the book but the movies, the magazines, or even the video games. They often don't own the books, borrowing them from their friends or brothers. These readers got interested in Harry Potter as a best-seller, a print version of the movies, and their appropriation of Harry Potter is strongly shaped by the experience and images of the movies. They don't pay attention to the author's status in the literary field or to the style of writing, and they won't read the books in English: the book is for them first a material object whose value lies in its size, its themes, its cover, and its ability to help them remember the movies and re-live their favourite movie scene. Elise privileges books adapted from movies because they help her to read, and she is more sensitive to best-

sellers, feelig ill at ease and lost in public libraries. She prefers to see the movies again because it is easier for her to imagine and visualize the characters and the settings.

This group of readers engages in strong relations with the story and the characters, but they are less exclusively based on the books.

Reading sociabilities

Sociabilities have been central in the constitution of the reading expectations and habits of this group of readers and occupy a great space in the pursuit of their reading practices. Family reading partners tend to be easier to keep, and Harry Potter is first and foremost a family or brotherly reading. The appropriation of Harry Potter is embedded in the dynamics of family relations through ritual birthday or Christmas gifts, family discussions, and lending. The strong readers in university or occupational contexts, who are now 18 to 20, tend not to organize their conversations and newly formed peer groups around Harry Potter, but it has remained a central support of their relations with their family, especially with younger brothers or sisters. For them, Harry Potter is a kind of cultural resource used to fuel family discussions, gifts, and exchanges; Harry Potter reading tends thus to preserve the memory of family and former friends from primary or grammar schools. For the readers still in high school, Harry Potter reading is more linked to peer group conversations, exchanges, and references.

Harry Potter's modes of reception: complexity and diversity

It's necessary to go beyond binary oppositions of analytic and ethical, and reflective and unreflective, styles of reading. There's a great diversity of both analytic and ethical modes of reading[1] (Hans Robert Jauss distinguished between five forms of "identification") (Jauss, 1982) and many variations in readers' levels of engagement, "horizons of expectations," and the repertoires of personal experiences they bring to their encounter with the Harry Potter books (Lahire, 1993; Long, 2003). The two dimensions are always present, even if some readers have more difficulties expressing their style of analytic reading or remembering details and others are embarrassed to talk about their feelings and emotions about a character. It's inaccurate to define an ethical or emotional mode of reception just by contrasting it to an analytic reading. Our aim was to analyze the way these dimensions combine in the same individual reader and within different categories of readers (see Table 1 to see how each reader combined the different modes of reception).

All the readers displayed a basic mastery of generic and narrative conventions, but there is a central distinction between the readers according not so much to their social position as to their school level of attainment, reception trajectory, and level of engagement with the books. I will describe here different forms of analytic and pragmatic or ethical readings: each reader combines these modes of reading in a specific way. There are, nonetheless, some correlations and recurrences.

A series of analytic readings

A taste for inquiry and "theories"

A first analytic mode of reception is very specific to a group of strong and passionate readers: some of them are the good students who discovered Harry Potter early and benefited from the cultural capital of their family; others come from less privileged backgrounds but are good at school. Their analytic appropriation is based on different reading expectations and stocks of knowledge.

The first group of readers engages in a specific analytic mode of reception centered on the global plot and the construction of hypotheses. This appropriation is supported by frequent and close rereadings, the use of internet sites, many conversations, and, sometimes, writing. These readers clearly privilege the books over the movies, and for them, the books constitute the legitimate ground for assessing the coherence and the acceptability of the film as an adaptation. Their vision is first and foremost a vision of, and affiliated with, the books. For them, the immersion in this magic world is facilitated by the books' length and abundance of details. They appreciate the role played by their imagination so that they can better visualize for themselves the characters and the settings in the book: "the books allow to make your own movie." Their favourite volume is often the third, and sometimes the sixth, because these volumes contain more revelations about the plot.

These readers often describe the characters according to their roles and functions in the progression of the plot. Their kind of intensive and analytical appropriation connects the reading practice to a more general treasure hunt centered on the overall plot. It encompasses books, magazines, and films in an activity aimed at accumulating clues and speculating about the overall plot of the seven novels.

Hannah, 17 (high school pupil; father: director of a public radio station; mother: Hebrew teacher at university) rereads each volume numerous times in English and in French in order to accumulate clues and "build her own theories." Rereadings allow her to discover new relevant details, to reinterpret them, and to check her theories. Aurélie, 19 (cashier; father: butcher; mother: cleaning lady), also does research to support her hypotheses: she looks for information about a word in the dictionary in order to make assumptions about the next volume. Anne-Kathrin and Helen also value this aspect of their reading

experience. Helen rereads when she thinks she forgot an element or to confirm one of her hypotheses. Her use of the internet is guided by this interpretative task: she doesn't pay attention to fan fiction but looks for plausible and carefully argued assumptions. Anne-Kathrin also engages in a systematic construction of hypotheses, and through the choice of her favourite tome, the third, she values "the underlying plot, the fight of Good and Evil," and also the multitude of details that make the coherence and the charm of this universe. Fanny, 21 (student, master in physiology and neuroscience; father: business executive; mother: mayor and former university director) has also a strong taste for enigmas. She hasn't enjoyed the sixth volume because, according to her, nothing happened and the love stories were too present, and more generally, she hates "romance."

They also read different sources of information about Harry Potter. They engage in "revision" readings before going to see the movie or before the publication of a new volume in order "to get back into the atmosphere and have a better critical eye." Through these repeated and patient readings, these readers maintain a horizon of expectation marked by memory and an overview of the six volumes.

This mode of appropriation has been progressively acquired and experienced by these readers and is supported by sociabilities. Hannah discovered the Harry Potter websites (Poudlard.org, the Harry Potter Lexicon) and uses the same categories to organize her interpretations. Thibault, 16 (high school pupil; father: high school teacher in French; mother: primary school teacher) declared that he had difficulties at the beginning. It was only after he saw others doing it that he began to focus on the details and to speculate. Helen worked out a theory about Rogue with her school friend and her cousin. They develop hypotheses together. Her friend spends much of her time on websites and tells her about hypotheses.

This interpretive activity entails specific practices of information research on the internet and in magazines and these readers develop a hierarchy of the different Harry Potter websites. Hannah privileges internet sites dedicated to Harry Potter. She gathers information not only about the overall plot but also on the many details of Harry Potter universe. She chats with other fans to test her hypotheses.

Another practice that accompanies the reception of Harry Potter is fan fiction writing. Carine, 19 (high school pupil; father: skilled worker; mother: administrative employee), wrote five chapters of twelve pages each. Hannah, 17, also wrote a fiction but hasn't dared to publish it. Thomas, 17 (high school pupil; father: musician; mother: journalist) had also started to write the beginning of the volume five with his cousin during holidays.

The coherence of possible worlds

Another kind of analytic reading is more carefully focused on the internal logic and coherence of the Harry Potter universe and is more specific to heroic-fantasy readers, who pay attention to details and descriptions and to the magic aspect. Lucie values all the details of this world and regrets that the movies only translate the action dimension of the story.

An erudite attention to symbols

An analytic appropriation is not necessarily centred on the global plot or on the coherence of the narrative universe but can concern a more local level and engage specialized stocks of knowledge external to the fiction. Some readers revel in a game of deciphering symbols and mythological references: this erudite attention is mostly displayed by those who concentrate on the highest levels of cultural capital in their family, their school attainment.

Beyond these diverse analytic modes of reception, all the readers display a mastery of generic and narrative conventions and a knowledge of the production constraints that was acquired through intense readings or with the help of the movies. They also refer to the basic elements taught in French courses in junior high school and high school and the tools used to analyse narratives. Their lucidity about narrative rules is noticeable in some phrases: "we cannot dislike this character…", "we are forced to like this character…."

Cultures of feelings and ethical perceptions

The receptions based on different cultures of feelings (Pasquier, 1999) and ethical perceptions are also active receptions and involve elaborate skills. The readers who put into practice one of the analytic receptions described above are also strongly involved in the psychological dimension, in the dynamics of love and family relations. The plot and the characters' personal stories are indeed intertwined and embody moral issues. They attach value to the "relation with the past" in their favourite volumes. The criteria used by the same reader to describe and appraise a character are often heterogeneous and combine narrative analysis and moral reaction.

A preference for psychological complexity

This kind of ethical and emotional appropriation engages forms of comparison between the readers' personal experiences and the characters. Cecilia's aspirations and personal evolution are noticeable in the choice of her favourite characters. Since she entered high school, Cecilia, 17 (high school pupil; father: business executive; mother: high school teacher in English) claims a break with her parents' and with her own image of a serious schoolgirl. She prefers Sirius because he is a troublemaker and the Wesley twins for their spirit of rebellion. She doesn't like Harry—too serious, false, and pretentious—and progressively distanced herself from Hermione, her former favourite character.

Readers from this group tend to distinguish themselves through their choice of adult or "bad" characters as their favourites and through their proclaimed indifference to Harry and Hermione. This preference sometimes indicates the frustrations of these readers and their aspirations toward more self-mastery. Cecilia appreciates Dumbledore because he "has a reflection about life, he stands back…. Often I cannot stand back and I would like to be like him. He never dramatizes, even when he knows he is about to die; he accepts it, and I find it's strong." These readers value psychological complexity and distance themselves from the too obvious role granted to teenage characters. Helen and Lucy want to be teachers and they prefer Miss MacGonagal for her qualities as a teacher, because she is efficient and comforting. The two characters preferred by Thibault are Sirius and Lupin because they are "mighty," have a "dark side" and compel respect: "I'd like to be like that sometimes because precisely I am not like that. I am not a guy who compels respect, who could make somebody shut up like that, and they can do it." But some of these engaged and analytic readers declare their strong attachment to Harry and Hermione because of the long-lasting relationship built with them.

A more exclusively sentimental appropriation

A second group of readers displays a mode of reception more exclusively centred on the ethical and emotional dimension. They do not situate these affective relations in the global context of the Harry Potter novels and plot. These readers are engaged in a less intense reading, privilege the movies, and have not a global and precise overview of the six volumes. They tend to prefer the teenaged main characters, like Harry or Hermione, and the romance or action dimensions of the story. Some revel in reading teenagers' magazines about the actors' personal lives. Marine made a scrapbook with all the articles and images she could find about the actors and wrote a letter to Daniel Radcliffe.

Stephanie and Clausel engage in ethical judgments in their preference for Hermione. Stephanie appreciates her commitment and Clausel her success in spite of her handicap. Lou doesn't engage in speculations about the plot, and the details she remembers best concern the attitudes of the characters and their sentimental relationships. For her, the battle against Voldemort is almost a detail, which she

rarely mentions in her conversations and expectations. Her favourite moment is when Harry asks Cho Chan to come with him to the ball. She is less touched by the magical aspects than by the daily school life in the novels, and she perceives the novels and the movies as a kind of teenage romance.

A "cool" engagement with the books

Some readers, mostly the casual readers from privileged backgrounds, prefer a more hedonistic and transitory relation with Harry Potter, without patient rereading and speculation, but they also want to distance themselves from emotional links with the characters by using irony.

The criteria used by the same reader to describe and appraise a character are often heterogeneous and shifting. They also vary according to the medium. Cecilia privileges the relational scenes in the books, whereas she prefers the action scenes in the movies.

Conclusion: A public and social space of receptions?

Harry Potter is thus a common cultural resource and reference that fuels the dynamics of family relations and personal networks. Readers perceive distinctions in the ways of appropriating Harry Potter, and they sometimes classify other readers according to their level and form of knowledge about Harry Potter. Some try to distance themselves from the image of the fan, perceived as feminine and too emotional, while others despise the image of the expert absorbed in the books. These forms of distancing refer to the implicit and multiple hierarchies concerning the proper ways of being a Harry Potter reader, organized by an opposition between serious exegesis focused on the plot and fictional universe and emotional adulation of the characters and actors. This stereotypical space of reception is differently perceived and valued by the readers. It allows some distinctive strategies and self presentations, but it also downplays the diversity and complexity of actual reading practices, which are shaped by cultural socialization processes, personal networks, and experiences.

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[1] We refer here to the distinction P. Bourdieu made between pragmatic and analytic ways of reading and the ways this distinction was criticized and re-elaborated by Bernard Lahire (1993), drawing on the concept of "appropriation" developed by Roger Chartier (1985) and Michel de Certeau (1980).

Contact (by email): Olivier Vanhée

Biographical note

Olivier Vanhée is a PhD student in sociology at the Ecole Normale Supérieure Lettres et Sciences

Humaines, Lyon, France.

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