

## CHAPTER ONE



# *The Dark Mark*

## DEMONIC CREATION OR DAREDEVIL HERO?

*At this very moment, people meeting . . . all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: 'To Harry Potter – the boy who lived!'*<sup>1</sup>

The Potter phenomenon has not only been unbelievably successful, it has aroused unbelievably strong reactions. Take, for example, the case of the headteacher of a small Kent school who in early 2000 suddenly found herself the focus of both local and national media attention when her concern over the effect of stories about witchcraft and wizardry on young, impressionable minds prompted her to ban the Harry Potter books from lessons and activities on school property. A committed Christian, she didn't want to be seen as giving the nod to anything that treated witchcraft either lightly or positively. 'We are a Church of England aided primary school,' she told reporters, 'which means the Church ethos is very important to what we do. The Bible is consistent in its teachings that wizards, devils and demons exist and are real and dangerous, and God's people are told to have nothing to do with them.'<sup>2</sup> Whilst not going so far as to forbid pupils to have their own copies of the books in school, she nevertheless tried to draw a firm line, making it very clear to all those

## *A Charmed Life*

in her care that both she and the school's governors frowned heavily on Joanne Rowling's literary output, together with anything and everything else that portrayed witches and wizards as 'fantasy, imaginary, fun and harmless'.

Public reaction to her ban varied enormously, and spread well beyond the confines of the school gates into the local community and (for a time, at least) most of the country. Some parents, concerned citizens and religious leaders entirely applauded her decision, sharing her fears that Harry Potter was the thin end of a wedge that could result in full-blown involvement in the occult and witch covens for some pupils, and a blindness to the potential risks for others who would see the occult as essentially a harmless, danger-free zone. Most people, however, seemed to feel that the ban was unwarranted, to say the least. Some were amused by what they saw as just a silly overreaction. Others expressed less generous, and perhaps unfair sentiments: outrage at such blatant efforts at censorship, or scorn and antipathy at what they considered the head's 'fundamentalist' brand of Christian views.

The newspapers, by and large, portrayed her as a fairly mild-mannered crackpot. They didn't question the sincerity of her motives but they *did* seriously doubt the soundness of her judgement.<sup>2</sup> Some even took her assurances that she had full support from the school's parents as a direct challenge to find dissenting mums and dads. At any rate, few other primary heads – including heads of church schools – endorsed the ban, and no school implemented similar measures. In fact, in a nationwide survey of primary and secondary headteachers done later in 2000 in conjunction with The Stationery Office, over ten per cent of heads admitted that they saw Albus Dumbledore, head of Rowling's Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, as something of a role model!

The Kent headteacher, however, was far from the only one

## *The Dark Mark*

with strong views. In other English-speaking countries, for instance, reactions have been just as extreme – positive and negative. Amongst supporters, enthusiasm has been high. On the eve of the US publication of *Azkaban* and *Goblet of Fire*, many bookstores – not permitted to sell copies before the official publication dates – threw Potter parties, complete with cakes, costumes and a countdown to midnight, so eager young readers wouldn't have to wait the eight or nine hours until morning. Instead, they could get their hands on a copy just minutes after it went on sale. Similarly, when Rowling toured the US in September 1999 to promote *Azkaban*, young Potterphiles pestered their parents and queued for hours outside stores in full costume – pointy hat, round glasses, a robe and a flash of lightning on the forehead – just for the chance to get a signed copy.

But negative reactions were just as frenetic. Shortly after the US release of *Azkaban*, anxious parents in South Carolina petitioned the state Board of Education to withdraw Harry Potter from elementary and junior high school libraries and reading lists. One mother, invited to address the Board in person about her concerns, told reporters she felt the books contained 'a serious tone of death, hate, lack of respect and sheer evil'.<sup>3</sup> The Board's minutes reduce her impassioned plea to a matter-of-fact line swamped by other business – a 'concerned parent' spoke 'regarding the use of certain books in schools'<sup>4</sup> – and the Board itself opted to do no more than review the suitability of the books for the schools in its jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the mother's words helped to galvanize opposition to Harry Potter across the nation.

Parents and school administrators in neighbouring Georgia – as well as in non-'Bible Belt' states such as Michigan, Minnesota, New York and California – tried to have the Harry Potter books removed from the shelves of their local school or public libraries, or axed from the curricula. In fact, the American Library Association reports that there were

more attempts to ban Harry Potter from libraries during 1999 than any other book, even though *Chamber of Secrets* and *Azkaban* were only published in the USA in June and September of that year, and *Goblet of Fire* didn't come out until July 2000. Reasons given were to do with the supposed 'focus on wizardry and magic' in the books. Canada similarly found itself experiencing Potterphobia: after pressure, a school board near Toronto briefly ruled that primary school pupils in its district would have to bring permission slips before Harry Potter could be read aloud in class. And in Australia, anxious parents and certain Christians petitioned to have stickers put on all copies of the books, warning all buyers and readers about the potential unsuitability of the contents. As late as April 2001, a fundamentalist group in rural Pennsylvania was reported to have burned the series in public along with videos of *Pinocchio* and *Hercules*.

For her part, Joanne Rowling hit back at the widely reported allegations that her books corrupted children or encouraged occult involvement. 'I have yet to meet a single child who's told me that they want to be a Satanist or are particularly interested in the occult because of the book[s],' she explained. Given her reclusive tendencies (she gave almost no interviews for the UK release of *Azkaban*, and agreed to promote *Goblet of Fire* only because she knew that there was no way to avoid the media circus), we might be tempted to take this comment with a large pinch of salt. However, the sheer volume of fan mail she has received from enthusiastic readers in over 40 countries should give us pause. The amount of positive feedback she has experienced has, at times, been overwhelming: after the success of *Azkaban* she had to move out of her besieged terraced house in Edinburgh into a part of the city that could provide her and her daughter with more privacy and protection.

Mostly, children want to express their enjoyment and beg her to keep on writing. But when US publishers Scholastic

launched a competition asking children to say 'How the Harry Potter Books Changed My Life', they received essays explaining how Harry, Ron, Hermione or one of the books' other characters had helped them to cope with illness, abuse, bullying or rock-bottom self-esteem. No one has yet suggested that they want to become a real-life witch or wizard (though one or two, especially amongst the books' older readers, may well fancy becoming the driver of Hogwarts' magical steam locomotive, the Hogwarts Express).

Nevertheless, staunch opposition to Harry Potter has continued almost as persistently and aggressively as the books themselves have continued to sell. Worried parents have tried to protect their children from what they perceive as a real threat, whilst many Christians and Church leaders have struck out against books they consider to stand (in the words of one e-mail correspondent to *Time* magazine's website) 'in direct conflict with Christianity'.

The release in July 2000 of the eagerly-awaited and over-hyped *Goblet of Fire* added more fuel to this well-stoked furnace. If parents in South Carolina had been worried by the 'serious tone of death, hate, lack of respect and sheer evil' pervading the first three books, *Goblet of Fire* must have confirmed their worst fears. The opening chapter, Rowling's darkest piece of writing to date, undoubtedly *does* contain a 'serious tone of death, hate, lack of respect and sheer evil'. In fact it contains two *actual* deaths – one reported and one described (though in true Hitchcock style, the menace is conveyed entirely by suggestion, rather than by any kind of graphic or grisly detail). It also contains the presence, in the flesh, of the villain of Potterworld, the virtual apotheosis of evil, Lord Voldemort. All in all, it heralds a shift in the mood of the series – a genuine darkening of the atmosphere. It ends, 630 pages after its grim beginning, with a kind of *Walpurgisnacht*:<sup>5</sup> the renaissance of Voldemort's feared henchmen, the Death Eaters, together with a dramatic showdown

between Harry and Voldemort himself, the senseless death of Cedric Diggory and an effective declaration of war between the forces of good and evil. And as if that weren't enough, the title of the final chapter, 'The Beginning', hints at even darker things to come in the saga's three remaining books.

### *The Boggart in the Wardrobe*

Opposition to Harry Potter in both the US and the UK has tended to focus, without any real distinction, on two specific issues: the darkness of the novels, and their apparent endorsement of magic and witchcraft. For many parents, it is not just that the books are too scary for young children, they are actually working to undermine 'good Christian values'.

In somewhere as secularized as Britain – where although over 60 per cent of the population sees itself as Christian, only about eight per cent can actually be found in church on any given Sunday morning – it is easy to imagine that an insistence on uniformly 'Christian values' being implemented in society is the preserve of just a tiny, if vocal, 'fundamentalist' minority. However, in terms of churchgoing and overt adherence to religious values, the US is an apparently more 'Christian' country than Britain – perhaps as much as 60 per cent of the population not only calls itself Christian but regularly attends church. 'Christian values', in other words, aren't just the moralistic crusade of the few but the basic moral framework of the many. So it is easy to understand how some anxious parents could interpret Potter wizardry as undermining the values of American society as a whole.

Unfortunately, objections to witchcraft on the grounds of 'good Christian values' have something of a sordid history. Between about 1380 and 1680, as many as 40,000 people, mostly women, were burnt for witchcraft in Europe, including up to 1000 in England and 1600 in Scotland. Most were executed after the medieval equivalent of 'due process' of law.

## The Dark Mark

As historian Barbara Tuchman wrote, 'Medieval justice was scrupulous about holding proper trials and careful not to sentence without proof of guilt but it achieved proof by confession rather than evidence, and confession was routinely obtained by torture.'<sup>6</sup> England's 'enlightened' alternative to the use of torture was no better: suspected witches were bound hand and foot and dropped into a river: those who drowned were pronounced posthumously innocent, whilst those who survived such certain death (aided, of course, by the devil) were promptly executed! There were no purges in England after 1680 but witchcraft remained a capital offence until 1737 and a popular obsession for some decades afterwards.

The most famous witch-hunt of all, of course, took place in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. When a group of girls began to scream, convulse and bark like dogs, Salem's townsfolk suspected they had been bewitched. When this and other strange forms of behaviour spread, people were gripped with fear that Satan himself had come to town. A full-scale witch-hunt was initiated and a special court set up to investigate. Since the threat faced was supernatural, the court accepted as all-but-conclusive proof of guilt the presence of warts or protrusions on a suspect's body (witch's teats to suckle a familiar), as well as spectral evidence that suspects had tortured people in their dreams. Those suspects indicted with such undeniable evidence who then 'confessed' their heinous crimes were spared death but those who stubbornly continued to insist on their innocence were dealt with harshly. Within a year, 19 people had been executed for witchcraft. Significantly, *no one* who stood trial was found not guilty. However, when the hysteria died down, the townsfolk began to question the safety of these convictions. Most of the remaining suspects were subsequently acquitted and the Massachusetts governor pardoned all those who weren't. Today, every one of the convictions is considered unsafe.

Any serious attempt to object to the Potter books on the grounds of their supposedly endorsing witchcraft will, of course, inevitably have to live in the shadow of this rather sordid history of witch-hunting and learn from its mistakes. It is not for nothing that the term 'witch-hunt' now has negative rather than positive connotations. The desire to protect society from demonic power, linked to a very real fear of the devil himself, hasn't always brought out the best in those most concerned to promote 'good Christian values'. Potterphobes take note: fear has all too often outweighed fact and a careful scrutiny of the evidence. No one, of course, has yet suggested burning Joanne Rowling at the stake, or subjecting her to a float-test, but most of the reaction against her books – fuelled by a praiseworthy desire to protect children from potentially harmful influences, and by a genuine fear of the demonic – has failed to examine closely enough both the evidence from the books themselves and the consistency and logic of the arguments used against them.

'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,' Franklin D. Roosevelt reassured a public gripped by the Great Depression, in his inaugural speech as US President in 1933. They were wise words. In fact Rowling herself has made use of them. In *Azkaban*, Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher Remus Lupin introduces his third-year class to a Boggart – a mischievous pest of a shape-shifter that can, in Hermione's predictably accurate description, 'take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most'.<sup>7</sup> As Lupin explains, Boggarts inhabit dark, enclosed spaces – the area beneath the bed, for example, or, as his class discovers for itself, the inside of the staffroom wardrobe. Boggarts have no real shape of their own but assume instead the form of what most terrifies the people they come into contact with. In Potterworld, they represent in its most basic form our very fear itself.

For Neville Longbottom, the Boggart in the wardrobe automatically takes the form of Professor Snape. Nothing and no

one, for poor Neville, is quite as terrifying and intimidating as the Hogwarts' Potions master. For Ron, it is a hairy, six-foot, human-eating spider. His natural fear of spiders, shared by many of the class, was considerably magnified by his narrow brush with death at the hands – or rather, pincers – of Aragog and his fellow outsized arachnids in *Chamber of Secrets*. For Lupin and Harry, the Boggart's transformation is slightly different: rather than directly taking the form of what they fear, the Boggart takes a form that *represents* their fear. For Lupin, it becomes a rather mystifying 'silvery white orb hanging in the air'. As the book later makes clear, this is a miniature moon: every month, under the full moon, Lupin turns into a werewolf and runs amok. What frightens him, however, isn't the moon itself but his own murderous potential – unless he is restrained (at first physically by being imprisoned in the Shrieking Shack, then later through the presence of his three Animagus friends, and in more recent times chemically by means of a special potion), he will prey unwittingly on man and beast. For Harry, the Boggart turns itself into a soul-sucking Dementor.

Real discussion of the Dementors will have to wait until Chapter Four. For now, what matters is Harry's fear of them. Assuming that what Harry fears most is actually Voldemort, Lupin intervenes in class before it gets to be his turn to confront the Boggart. 'I didn't think it a good idea for Lord Voldemort to materialise in the staff room,' Lupin explains. 'I imagined that people would panic.'<sup>8</sup> When Harry admits that he *had* initially thought of Voldemort but had then realized that he feared the Dementors even more, Lupin is impressed. 'That suggests that what you fear most of all is – fear,' he remarks.<sup>9</sup> For Harry, the Dementors represent a greater threat even than Lord Voldemort because he doesn't know how to combat them. Their appearance, whether in the Hogwarts Express train or on the Quidditch pitch, disarms Harry completely, overcome by the buried memory of his

parents' cruel death at Voldemort's hands. Their soul-sucking abilities rob him of his strength in a way that even Voldemort doesn't. As Lupin explains, 'The Dementors affect you worse than the others because there are horrors in your past that the others don't have.'<sup>10</sup> The Dementors prey on this horror, amplifying it and feeding on it, and Harry's inability to confront them – to confront his own fear and past horror – makes them the thing that frightens him the most. Almost literally, the only thing he has to fear is fear itself.

In a way, the Potter books act rather like a Boggart: the threat they represent is defined by the fears people bring to them. Those most frightened by the potential danger of witchcraft and the occult see in Harry Potter the thin end of a wedge that will lead inevitably into coven membership and demonic possession. Those most frightened by the very real possibility that their own or other people's children will be in some way abused or corrupted by society see in the books a slippery slope into a contaminated culture. Those who themselves fear death, evil and the psychological equivalent of gnarling monsters under the bed see in the increasingly lurid ambience of Potterworld 'a serious tone of death, hate, lack of respect and sheer evil'. What they are seeing isn't Harry Potter, but a Boggart: an inherently shapeless representation of their own fears.

By saying this, I am not trying to belittle those fears, or the concerns and motivations of those who, generally with the best of intentions, have fired a broadside at Harry Potter. One of the things that the incident of the Boggart in the wardrobe makes clear – abundantly clear – is that fears are powerful influences and that left unchecked they can be soul destroying. Fears need to be confronted. In fact as we shall see in the next chapter, one of the reasons why I'm so positive about Harry Potter is precisely because it gives children (and adults) the chance to face their fears and begin to tackle them within a safe environment. It is good for the issues of child

safety, social corruption, death and even the demonic to be given a higher priority on the public agenda, since they are frequently ignored. (In his satirical book *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis warned of the twin dangers on the one hand of entirely dismissing the seriousness of the demonic, and on the other hand of taking it too seriously.) However, there is a great difference between using the Potter books as a convenient starter for a discussion of the occult or of amorality in children's literature, for example, and attacking it for actually endorsing the occult or being amoral (or even immoral). The first is justified, even beneficial. The second is in reality nothing more than an attack on a Boggart, driven by fear divorced from fact.

### *'It Ain't Necessarily So . . .'*

Take the negative reaction that Harry Potter should be opposed, at least by Christians, because it is fundamentally a tale about witchcraft and the occult. This was the response of the Kent primary head, among others. 'The Bible is consistent in its teachings that wizards, devils and demons exist and are real and dangerous,' she told reporters, explaining her ban on the Potter books. 'God's people are told to have nothing to do with them.' Half a world away, ignorant of the shenanigans in Kent, a correspondent to *Time* magazine's website agreed. 'From reviews I have read, Harry is a warlock, or male witch. In this [he] is in direct conflict with Christianity.'

If these comments were true and relevant to Harry Potter, there would indeed be some cause for concern, at least for Christians. They are, however, wide of the mark. The wizardry and witchcraft of Potterworld is a fictional device, quite different in its tone and content from the wizardry and witchcraft that stand in conflict with Christianity. For example, Rowling is careful *not* to describe Harry as a

'warlock'. Although – or rather, I think, *because* – this is the technically correct term, she uses it very rarely and never in reference to Harry, preferring instead the more fanciful and fictive term 'wizard'.

Rowling's choice of words usually seems to be deliberate, especially when it comes to names. Some sound funny or particularly appropriate: Slytherin and Hufflepuff, for example, are onomatopoeic names for the school houses represented in Hogwarts' heraldry as a snake and a badger, and Professor Sprout is well-named for a Herbology teacher. Others, however, appear to have a rather deeper meaning: the name of Harry's school nemesis Draco Malfoy, for instance, breaks down into the Latin for 'snake' and 'bad faith'; his Animagus guardian Sirius Black, who has the ability to turn himself into a black dog, is named after Sirius, the bright 'dog star' in the *Canis Major* constellation; werewolf teacher Remus Lupin is named after the Latin for 'wolf' and the name of one of Rome's two mythological founders, suckled by a she-wolf; Potions master Severus Snape's name derives from the Latin for 'severe' and an English word meaning 'chide' or 'rebuke'; house-elf Dobby's name is a late seventeenth-century English term for a 'dunce' and a late eighteenth-century term for a household spirit. (It is, of course, possible to take this kind of analysis too far: there is as yet no evidence to link Hogwarts' headmaster Albus Dumbledore with albino bumblebees, even though '*albus*' is Latin for 'white' and 'dumbledore' is a sixteenth-century English term for a bumblebee; nor is there any suggestion that the school's motto – '*Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus*' – should be translated 'never rouse a dormant snake' rather than the less ominous but much funnier 'never tickle a sleeping dragon'!)

By choosing 'wizard', Rowling creates a more fanciful, frivolous tone than she would have done if she had opted for 'warlock'. 'Wizard', a medieval word derived from 'wise', is

linked to centuries of folklore and storytelling rather than modern witchcraft. It is also a word in common use – ‘financial wizard’ or ‘technical wizard’, for example. Having decided, in other words, to use magic in her stories, she would appear to have opted for the storyteller’s brand of magic rather than the more serious occult brand of magic.

But is this a meaningful distinction? Are there really ‘occult’ and ‘non-occult’ types of magic – harmful ones of fact and harmless ones of fiction? Regardless of the words Rowling uses to describe what her characters do, and her own desire to tell a story rather than promote serious witchcraft, doesn’t the very presence of magic and witchcraft in Potterworld stand ‘in direct conflict with Christianity’? I believe the answer to this question has to be *no*. Though there is – in the Bible, for instance – a clear distinction between damnable ‘magic’ on the one hand and divine ‘miracle-working’ on the other, they can, on the surface, look remarkably alike.

The patriarch Joseph, for example, had a God-given talent for interpreting dreams – a skill that would have seemed ‘magical’ to his Egyptian overlords. From their perspective, dreams were one of the principal means by which Egypt’s gods communicated their will and desire to their human subjects. Similarly, Moses’ God-given ability to turn Aaron’s staff into a snake, and to predict the plagues, would have been seen by Egypt’s wizards (‘wise men’) as incidents of pagan magic, worked by skill through the power of Egypt’s own ‘gods’. Even the miracles of Jesus were seen by many as having been wrought by demonic power: ‘He has Beelzebul,’ they said, ‘and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’<sup>11</sup> They didn’t doubt the *reality* of his exorcisms but they did suspect him of witchcraft and wizardry. In the words of the second-century Christian writer Justin Martyr, ‘Those who saw these events taking place alleged that it was a magical illusion, and indeed they dared to call him a sorcerer and a deceiver of the people.’<sup>12</sup> Jewish rabbis later recorded

the charge against Jesus as it came down to them: 'He has practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy.'<sup>13</sup>

Of course, readers of Genesis, Exodus and the Gospels know, thanks to the benefit of hindsight, what was far from obvious to contemporary observers: that Joseph, Moses and Jesus were performing 'miracles' by the power of God rather than pagan 'magic'. But as New Testament scholar Tom Wright puts it, 'Jesus does seem to have used techniques, in performing cures, which his contemporaries might well have regarded as magical.'<sup>14</sup>

In fact in the most famous instance of 'wizardry' in the Bible, the wizards themselves receive honourable mention. As anyone who has ever been to a nativity play knows, men came from the east to see Jesus after his birth. The New Testament doesn't tell us their names, nor that they were kings, nor even how many of them there were – 'We Three Kings of Orient' is the fanciful invention of a much later age. But Matthew's gospel (the only one to record their arrival) does give us an extraordinary detail: they were 'wise men' – 'wise-ards' or 'wizards'.<sup>15</sup> They are sometimes called 'magi' (which gives us the English 'magic' and 'magician'), the Latin version of Matthew's ancient Greek word. They weren't Jews or Christians: they came from the Parthian Empire and dabbled in the branch of wizardry we would now call 'astrology'.

So where does this leave the magic of Harry Potter? For a start, 'devils and demons' are nowhere to be found in Potterworld. Magic merely seems to be a force or an instrument that characters use in rather the same way we use electricity. Unlike the magic condemned in the Bible, Potterworld magic doesn't symbolize or flow from a supernatural or demonic realm in opposition to God: it is simply *there*. It is part of the natural (and sometimes even mundane) order of wizard reality. In short, it remains a literary device to thrill the

## *The Dark Mark*

reader, and to allow the author to create an alternative world unbound by the laws of physics.

In this respect, it is comparable to the equally unscientific and quasi-magical powers of literary creations such as Superman. For all the pseudo-science put forward to explain Superman's ability to fly (even through outer space, where logically he should die from lack of oxygen), his x-ray vision or his unbelievable strength, we know it's all hokey. It simply can't happen: elementary physics tells us that. Yet we lap it up without a second thought, scientific or Christian. Never mind the quasi-religious elements: that Superman's name, *Kal El*, means 'like God' in Hebrew, or that the name of his home planet, Krypton, is Greek for something 'hidden' or 'secret'. We see it for what it genuinely is: a bit of fun to be had by imagining a state of affairs that could never actually exist. Harry Potter's magical world is the same. To be sure, we might have some justifiable misgivings about the phenomenon of magic used in the series. However, these have nothing to do with the baseless charge of demonism or occultism levelled by many of Harry's critics.

## *The Deeper Magic*

In fact the kind of magic, wizardry and witchcraft we encounter in Potterworld is very similar to the kind we encounter in another classic work of children's literature, C. S. Lewis' Narnia series. In their time, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the other six Narnia books were so groundbreaking that they were attacked for being 'juvenile' and considerably beneath the undoubted talents of their respected and august creator. Today, though we might criticize them for being rather quaint and for suffering from the kind of flaws that belong to anything that stands as the first in its field, we can hardly attack them for being juvenile.

Still less, however, can we attack them as 'demonic

creations' in the way that Harry Potter is sometimes attacked. In part this is because they are so well established as part of the canon of children's literature. Many generations have grown up loving Lewis' creations. They are familiar, faithful and foundational to most people in the UK, who have either read them to their children, read them to themselves, or had them read to them by their parents some time in the last 50 years. There is, however, a second and perhaps more compelling reason why the Narnia Chronicles have escaped the kind of criticism and vitriol that has been levelled at Harry Potter: they were written by a man whose Christian credentials were impeccable. Lewis is, in a word, fireproof.

An Oxford don and subsequently Cambridge Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature, C. S. Lewis was also, from the late 1930s until his death in 1963, the most respected and skilful defender of Christian orthodoxy in Britain. *Mere Christianity*, a collection of his popular World War II radio broadcasts about the Christian faith, is still almost as influential as it was when it was first published in 1952, and his argument as to why Jesus *cannot* have been merely a 'great moral teacher' – but must instead have been either a self-deceiving 'lunatic', a self-promoting 'fiend' or 'God in human form' – continues to form the basis of many evangelistic talks on the identity of Jesus up and down the country, and to some extent across the world. *The Screwtape Letters* – ostensibly written by a senior devil to a junior one, advising him on the best ways to tempt humans to sin – is a profound, satirical and very funny examination of human nature and spirituality, and besides being something of a set-text for would-be 'spin doctors', it is one of the very few Christian books frequently read by those who want nothing whatsoever to do with the Church.

*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the best known of 'Jack' Lewis' ten novels,<sup>16</sup> is a classic work of Christian allegory (though the blatantly allegorical elements are gener-

## *The Dark Mark*

ally lost on its millions of young readers). It combines a deceptively simple narrative style with what are now stock-in-trade elements in fantasy children's literature – a sympathetic group of children, an old and unusual house to explore, a mysterious cupboard leading to other realms, magical creatures, a wicked witch, deception, betrayal, outstanding bravery and the eventual triumph of good over evil. It is a benchmark of children's fiction, a book that has stirred hearts and sparked imaginations for over half a century.

It is also filled to the brim with magic. Aslan may not dispense magic from the end of a wand as the evil White Witch does – and as the characters in Potterworld do – but that doesn't make him any less a magical creature. In fact Lewis makes no bones about the fact that magic is a dominant feature in the world of Narnia, sewn into its very fabric by 'the Emperor' at 'the very beginning', capable of being used for good or for ill. The Witch invokes 'Deep Magic' when she points out that Edmund's treachery makes his lifeblood *her* property, and Aslan submits to this when he proposes to die in Edmund's place. He admits and endorses the role that magic plays in Narnia even if he opposes the Witch's malevolent use of it. The idea that he should 'work against the Emperor's Magic' is one that he finds unthinkable. But he in turn invokes 'deeper magic' when he rises from the dead. Lucy and Susan hear a deafening noise, 'a great cracking' and return to the scene of Aslan's death to find the Stone Table broken in two and Aslan's body nowhere to be found. Like the women at Jesus' tomb on the morning of his resurrection, they're totally bewildered.

*'Who's done it?' cried Susan. 'What does it mean? Is it more magic?'*

*'Yes!' said a great voice behind their backs. 'It is more magic... Though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a deeper magic still which she did not know.'*<sup>17</sup>

## *A Charmed Life*

Lewis seems to have had no problem with the forces of good and the forces of evil in Narnia using the same basic order of magic. The difference is not that one is 'witchcraft and wizardry' and the other is somehow benign, but that one is used for evil and the other is used for good. The heroes of Narnia may not be called witches and wizards or go around waving magic wands but they are very like the heroes of Potterworld in that they use an essentially neutral force – or perhaps even a force designed for good ('the Emperor's Magic') but which has been twisted and used for evil by the stories' villains – in order to better the world around them and ensure that right ultimately triumphs over wrong.

Much the same thinking underlies another undisputed literary classic by another safely Christian author, J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings*, published in three volumes in 1954 and 1955 (contemporaneous with Narnia books five and six), is much darker, more violent and more impregnated with magic and wizardry than the Narnia Chronicles. Nevertheless, in poll after poll, English-language readers have voted it the 'best book of the twentieth century' – it is an acknowledged literary masterpiece by a true literary master, unparalleled both in the complexity of its creation and in the sheer amount of background work done by its creator (some published posthumously as *The Silmarillion*, some re-edited by Tolkien's son Christopher in his twelve-volume series, *The History of Middle-earth*).

Ronald Tolkien received a great deal of encouragement to write *The Lord of the Rings* from his close friend Jack Lewis, whom he had met (and steered toward the Christian faith) in the early 1930s when he was Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. The two of them had been part of a small writers' group called 'The Inklings'. Lewis can hardly have been blind to the magical ingredients of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is, in many ways, a sequel to Tolkien's 1937 bestseller *The Hobbit*, which contains many of the same characters and character-

## *The Dark Mark*

istics. What is more, Lewis had already written repeatedly in praise of Tolkien's 1939 lecture and essay 'On Fairy-Stories'. Having faced criticism for writing about magical creatures, 'Tollers' (as Lewis affectionately called him) had been keen to establish the academic credentials of fairy stories, which he defined as requiring the twin ingredients of humans and the *Faërie* realm. This, he argued, 'may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic'.<sup>18</sup> For both Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, therefore, magic was more than just an accidental ingredient in their work – it was a basic necessity of the genre of story they had chosen to write.

The magic and wizardry of *The Lord of the Rings* is, of course, far more sophisticated than that of Narnia, and the characters, sketched in considerably more detail, are far more nuanced and realistic. The tension between goodness and evil is seen both between and within characters in a way never achieved (or perhaps intended) in Narnia, in part because Lewis was writing far more self-consciously for children. Though there is some suggestion by Tolkien that magic in and of itself can be dangerous and harmful – both Bilbo and Frodo Baggins find themselves warped by possession of the magical One Ring, taking on more and more of the undesirable characteristics of its one-time owner Gollum – the book's basic philosophy seems in many ways to be that magic is an essentially neutral force. The right use of magic enhances a person's innate goodness, while the wrong use exacerbates their innate evil.

It is not just that good people use magic to do good and evil people use it to do evil; there is in *The Lord of the Rings* a recognition that magic is a form of power, and as Lord Acton noted, 'power tends to corrupt'. When power is used wisely, everyone benefits; when it is used unwisely, all but a few suffer. In the same way, when magic is used wisely, everyone benefits; when it is used unwisely, all but a few suffer. Nevertheless, the temptation to do evil and the possibility of

redemption are always there: Saruman, once the greatest of all wizards, falls prey to his own corrupting greed and betrays the forces of good, whilst Gollum in some senses redeems himself by guiding Frodo to Mount Doom.

One way of interpreting magic in Tolkien (and also in Rowling) is therefore to see it as symbolic. It stands for the use of power. It is a metaphor for how human beings exercise power and the susceptibility of human nature to its abuse. The struggles between good and evil in Middle Earth or Potterworld act as parables that make us think about the kind of struggles for power that take place in our own everyday world. Once we realize this, we see that the criticisms thrown against magic in the Harry Potter books are a misreading of its dramatic and literary function, and are consequently misplaced.

### *'Can the Devil Speak True?'*

If we reject Harry Potter, therefore, on the grounds that it endorses wizardry and magic, or has a tone of darkness about it, we will also have to reject, on exactly the same grounds, both *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as keeping a rather close eye on certain parts of the Bible just in case children accidentally get the 'wrong' idea. We will also have to expunge from the school syllabus such clearly dubious works of English literature as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, with its three future-predicting witches and undeniably menacing tone. As with Harry Potter, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Lord of the Rings*, magic and wizardry – in this case the witchcraft of the 'weird sisters' – is integral to the plot (though *not* the main theme). Without the witches' prediction that the Scots war hero Macbeth, the Thane of Glamis, will swiftly rise to become first the Thane of Cawdor and then the King of Scotland, he and his less-than-good lady wife would not have hatched the plot to

## *The Dark Mark*

murder Duncan and claim the throne for themselves. But the witches are not the real villains of the piece, however they may sometimes have been painted. They *predict* the future but they don't actually make it a reality. Instead, it is the very *unmagical* Lady Macbeth who sells her soul to the devil, inviting murderous spirits to 'fill me from the crown to the toe top full of direst cruelty'.<sup>19</sup> And it is the very *unwizardsly* Macbeth himself who initiates the final disaster by arranging for the murder of his friend Banquo.

In the end, *Macbeth* is not a play about witchcraft, although witchcraft plays a key role. It is about power, greed and guilt, and the ultimate triumph of good over a self-destructive and murderous brand of evil. At a push, Shakespeare could have replaced the witches with another plot device, and still have retained the essential components of the story (in a way that Lewis and Tolkien couldn't). However, the story developed in his own mind *with* the witches and he never saw the need to change it, even though he was writing his plays at a time when witch-hunts were both real and fervent, especially over the border in Scotland where *Macbeth* is set. Shakespeare seems to have felt that his audience, drawn from all walks of life (literally from royalty right down to the gutter), was sophisticated enough to follow the story, and draw the intended moral lesson from it (for *Macbeth* is a very moralizing play), without in the process signing up to occult membership. The answer to Banquo's poignant question, 'Can the devil speak true?'<sup>20</sup> would in this case appear to be a solid yes.

Much the same can be said about Harry Potter. As Hermione remarks dismissively of her own wizardry, it is nothing but, 'Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery.'<sup>21</sup> In the end, Joanne Rowling's books fundamentally are *not* about witchcraft and wizardry, although witchcraft and wizardry play a key role. They are about a gifted, vulnerable boy called Harry; his

equally gifted and equally vulnerable friends Ron and Hermione; their respective and variously dysfunctional families; their adventures in and out of school; their friends and enemies; the problems they face growing up; and the decisive role they play in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Wizardry is important to the stories but they are not *about* wizardry. Magic is an integral part of the plot but at a push Rowling (like Shakespeare but *not* Lewis or Tolkien) could potentially have found an alternative plot device and still have retained most of the essential components of the story.

This was a point made by the actor and author Stephen Fry – who reads the Potter books for the UK audio versions – when he was asked to interview Joanne Rowling for Bloomsbury’s website. ‘In many ways,’ he remarked, ‘the stories would hold together even if there were no magic in them, because what people really come away with seems to be the relationships – particularly, obviously, Hermione, Harry and Ron.’ Rowling agreed. Though the magic was important, it wasn’t *all-important*. In fact ironically, her audience seemed to appreciate the magic more when it *didn’t* work than when it *did*. ‘From the reactions I get, particularly from children, it is the characters they care about most,’ she explained. ‘They are deeply amused by the magic going wrong and so on but they really deeply care about the characters, particularly the three central characters: Harry, Ron and Hermione.’

Sure enough, in each of the four books published so far, it is not the magic or wizardry of the intrepid trio that wins the day. Instead, it is their all-too-human goodness and friendship, teaming up against an evil that frequently proves itself to be self-defeating. In *Philosopher’s Stone*, for example, it is an equal and ultimately self-sacrificial effort by the three friends – Harry’s bravery and ingenuity, Ron’s chess skills and Hermione’s logic – that gets Harry ‘through the trapdoor’ and into the last chamber for his confrontation with Voldemort

## The Dark Mark

and Quirrell, and it is Quirrell's greed and Voldemort's hatred that finally undo their plans to acquire the Elixir of Life. In *Chamber of Secrets*, again it is Hermione's knowledge (gained at great personal cost), Ron's courage and Dumbledore's phoenix that enable Harry to confront the image of the young Voldemort inside the Chamber, and it is a tooth from Voldemort's own deadly Basilisk that proves to be his downfall.

In *Azkaban* and *Goblet of Fire*, the situation is more complex, both because the books' endings are not as neat and self-contained as the previous two – they hint at far more to come – and because the various ingredients that make the endings possible are added over a longer period of time. What is more, as the three friends slowly become more adept at magic, magical solutions present themselves more easily. Nevertheless, wizardry is never *the* vital ingredient in resolving problems. It never acts as a kind of *deus ex machina*.

In ancient Greek and Roman theatre, if a playwright was at a complete loss to know how to draw the threads of his play together into an acceptable ending, he would introduce a god into the script. An actor, clearly masked as the relevant god, would be winched onto the stage by a wooden crane, descending to earth to make things right. The technique smacked of desperation and the term *deus ex machina* ('a god from a machine') is still used to deride any play, book, film or television programme that relies on artificial means to solve plot problems – from the arrival of the US Cavalry just in the nick of time to Bobby Ewing's appearance in the shower to reveal that an entire series of *Dallas* was nothing but a dream! Harry Potter is mercifully free from this kind of device. The solutions that arise are carefully drawn not only from the ingredients of the plot but also from the personalities of the characters involved.

Hermione's time travelling, for example – a literary device not necessarily linked to magic, used to very good effect by Dickens in his fiercely moralistic tale *A Christmas Carol* – is

introduced in a veiled way quite early on in *Azkaban* for reasons that fit perfectly with her character as a chronic over-achiever. It is her bookishness and enthusiasm that lead to its being a credible factor in the story, and from there the means by which Harry finds the confidence and strength to confront the Dementors. Similarly, in *Goblet of Fire*, when the wand-blasts of Harry's and Voldemort's spells connect in mid-air, it is the song of Dumbledore's phoenix and the ghostly echoes of Voldemort's victims – Cedric Diggory, Frank Bryce, Bertha Jorkins and Harry's own parents – that give Harry the courage and time to escape death at Voldemort's hands. The magic is there but it is actually the humanity of the characters that proves to be the decisive factor in enabling good to defeat the purposes of evil.

In this, Harry Potter is very similar to television shows like *Bewitched* in the 1960s, or *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* in the 1990s – programmes that have equally been accused of promoting the occult. Both of these were long running series, for the reason that they relied on character development rather than the *deus ex machina* of witchcraft and magic. *Bewitched* was essentially about life as an American family: an advertising executive, his work, his wife, his daughter and, of course, his mother-in-law. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* is essentially about life as an American teenager: a girl, her relatives (two maiden aunts), her school, her friends, her romances and, of course, her talking cat! When we consider shows like these, two things quickly stand out: firstly, the magic is pre-eminently a *comic* device. Its purpose is to elicit laughter, to make the viewer see the situation from a comedic perspective. Harry Potter is the same: magical happenings run through every chapter and a large part of their function is to play a joke on the reader. It is as if Joanne Rowling is saying to us: 'O come on! Surely you don't take this stuff seriously?' If we fail to recognize the essential playfulness of Potterworld and magic's

playful role in it, we shall have misread the series entirely. It can only be understood with a sense of humour.

Secondly, *Bewitched* and *Sabrina* depend for their longevity on the ability of viewers to identify with the characters. Real wizardry and witchcraft might fill a dozen programmes but can't stretch to four or five series – for that you need properly human characters, commonly human problems and essentially human solutions. The same is true of Harry Potter – the books succeed not because they contain witchcraft and magic but because they contain characters that readers can identify with and care about.

Perhaps that's why Christians have been amongst both Potterworld's fiercest critics and also its staunchest supporters. For all those – like the reactionary parents in North Carolina – who have insisted with Banquo that 'to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray 's in deepest consequence',<sup>22</sup> there have been others who have seen far more than 'honest trifles' in Harry Potter.

'Children will not find in Harry Potter a tract for the dark arts, but will encounter a world where material and spiritual forces are interwoven,' wrote Canon June Osborne in *The Times*. 'As in most mythical tales, this is a moral and ordered world telling us abiding truths about the human story.' Though she sympathized with those who were concerned about exposing children to the occult, Osborne insisted that Harry Potter didn't fall into that category.

*The strongest message at the heart of these stories is the all-conquering power of love. Harry owes his life, and evil its downfall, to an act of self-sacrifice. How that love infiltrates Harry's life is a positive influence on our children's scheme of values. Christians and many others will recognise such themes and doubly rejoice: that they are being told to our children as well as being so much enjoyed.*<sup>23</sup>

## *A Charmed Life*

So is Harry Potter a demonic creation? I firmly believe not. Though the books contain witchcraft and evil, they don't promote these things any more than *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or *The Lord of the Rings*, which also contain witchcraft and evil. In fact in many ways the Potter books are *less* linked to magic and wizardry than the very *undemonic* works of Lewis and Tolkien. Is Harry Potter a daredevil hero? Again, I believe not. As we'll see in Chapter Two, he's not Superboy. He may be courageous and skilled on the Quidditch pitch but he's far from omnipotent. There's a fundamental realism to him, a vulnerability, without which he would never have appealed to both children and adults in the way he has. At the end of the day, Harry is neither devil nor saint – he's essentially 'the boy who lived'.