
Love, Death, and Friendship in the Harry Potter Novels

BY JOHN KILLINGER

After thousands of pages of Harry Potter's story, it is clear now that this has been J. K. Rowling's theme from the beginning: love, friendship, sacrifice, and eventually life. For it is life that springs out of Harry's gift of himself: the life of self-sacrifice, the life that defeats death, the life of ongoing friendship.

Friends. Amigos. Chums. Companions. Mates. Buddies. Jesus did not say lightly to his disciples at the Last Supper, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.... I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends" (John 15:13, 15). Scholars think they were celebrating a Jewish friendship meal, one in which men pledged their love and fidelity to one another regardless of what might befall them. In view of what was about to happen, Jesus' words were extraordinarily charged with meaning and emotion.

J. K. Rowling, author of the popular Harry Potter novels, may have had that scene in mind when she began her seventh and final novel of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, for she set at its beginning an epigram from William Penn, founder of the Quakers: "This is the comfort of friends, that though they may be said to die, yet their friendship and society are, in the best sense, ever present, because immortal."¹ Then she wrote a story that in many ways parallels the death and resurrection of Jesus.

I had suspected from the first novel that Harry was actually a Christ-figure. He was marked in an early encounter with the evil Lord Voldemort by a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, and the name for God vouchsafed to Moses, *I Am Who I Am*, is believed by some to have been derived

from a primitive description of a lightning bolt. Harry's arrival at his Muggle (that is, nonwizarding) relatives' home was marked by strange phenomena in the natural world, like those that accompanied the birth of Jesus. Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall, who oversaw his arrival, looked suspiciously like God the Father and Sophia, his female counterpart. At Hogwarts, the wizarding school, Harry fell in with a coterie of very special close friends – Hermi-

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one Granger, Ron Weasley, and Neville Longbottom – who often remind us of Jesus' inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John. (Ron is the stubborn, blustering Peter!)

I suggested, therefore, in a book called *God, the Devil, and Harry Potter*, written after the fourth

novel had appeared, that Harry would eventually die like Christ.² And indeed, in the final novel, he does. He dies voluntarily, as Christ did, literally presenting himself to Voldemort for execution. And then, as Christ did, he returns from death, this time to deal a mortal blow to the prince of darkness himself.

If there was any doubt about Harry's being created in the image of Christ, it is surely dispelled in *The Deathly Hallows* volume, where he is repeatedly called "the Chosen One." And there is that "This Is Your Life" moment when Harry and Hermione go back to Godric's Hollow, his birthplace, arriving on Christmas Eve as snow is falling in the square before the little church. Inside the church, worshipers are singing Christmas carols, and as Harry and Hermione cross the square she suddenly stops dead.

"Harry, look!" she cries.

She was pointing at the war memorial. As they had passed it, it had transformed. Instead of an obelisk covered in names, there was a statue of three people: a man with untidy hair and glasses, a woman with long hair and a kind, pretty face, and a baby boy sitting in his mother's arms. Snow lay upon all their heads, like fluffy white caps. (p. 324)

It is the Holy Family – Joseph, Mary, and Jesus – or, in this case, James, Lily, and Harry. Harry stands enraptured by it. It was strange, Rowling writes, "to see himself represented in stone, a happy baby without a scar on his forehead."

They move on toward the church, and as they go the statue becomes the war memorial again.

It is clearer than ever that Harry must die, that in the end he will walk into Voldemort's presence and lay down his life for his friends—for *all* his friends, not only Ron, Hermione, and Neville, but all the students at Hogwarts and all their families and all the wizards and Muggles in the world. He will die in order that others may live.

There is no vainglory in what he does, no posturing, no sense of histrionics. Dumbledore has told him often enough: he *loves*. It is the reason he can defeat the evil Lord Voldemort, who lacks the power to understand love and who laughs at Harry because he knows it motivates him. It is the reason Harry can walk calmly and deliberately into the maw of death and lay down his life.

Rowling understands the connection between friendship and love, the mystery at the heart of the gospel. She makes the statement through a fanciful ceiling in the home of Xenophilus Lovegood—the name is important—when Harry visits the Lovegood home and is captivated by the scene at the head of the stairs. Climbing the stairs, he examines the painting on the ceiling and sees his own portrait in it—his and Ron's and Hermione's and Neville's. In its beauty and grandeur, it is like a ceiling by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel.

"What appeared to be golden chains," says Rowling, "wove around the pictures, linking them together, but after examining them for a minute or so, Harry realized that the chains were actually one word, repeated a thousand times in golden ink: friends. . . friends. . . friends..." (p. 417).

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For it is life that springs out of Harry's gift of himself: the life of self-sacrifice, the life that defeats death, the life of ongoing friendship and relationship.

Which is why Rowling could not end her final novel without a post-script. It is called "Nineteen Years Later."

Harry has come back to life after his duels with Voldemort. He and his friend Ginny have married, and they have three little children, James, Albus, and Lily. Ron and Hermione have married too, and have two children, Rose and Hugo. They all run into one another at the famous track 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, where Rose, James, and Albus are catching the train to Hogwarts.

Draco Malfoy, the villainous young man in the novels who was mean and cowardly but not completely evil has also married, and he, his wife, and their son Scorpius are likewise waiting for the train. Sadly, Draco does not feel comfortable with his old acquaintances. When he sees them staring in his direction, he nods curtly and turns away. The reader cannot help feeling sorry for him. Like Voldemort, he simply does not know how to love.

"Don't forget to give Neville our love!" Ginny tells James as she hugs him goodbye.

“Mum!” he expostulates. “I can’t give a professor *love!*”

“But you *know* Neville,” she says.

James rolls his eyes.

“Outside, yeah,” he says, “but at school he’s Professor Longbottom, isn’t he? I can’t walk into Herbology and give him *love...*” (p. 757).

It’s a dear little passage, very telling, and Rowling’s last word on the subject. She must have hated giving up her sermon there, because it has been so important to her all along. It is, she realizes, the heart of the Christian faith and the secret of life itself.

“No one has greater love than this,” said Jesus, “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

And then: “I have called you friends.”

From Jesus to William Penn and now to J. K. Rowling, this is the truth that shines like a precious gem at the center of humanity’s long struggle for meaning and justification. Love – genuine caring and involvement in the lives of others – is the key to our very existence!

NOTES

1 J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2007). Page citations will be in the text.

2 John Killinger, *God, the Devil, and Harry Potter* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002).



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