

# J. K. Rowling and the Golden Calf

## Harry Potter Inc. is about to mesmerize the marketplace

BY SUSAN LINN

**T**he long-awaited release this weekend of "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" has uncorked a predictable flood of media analysis dissecting the boy wizard's astounding popularity. But pundits are missing the point.

What is most amazing is how our imagination has been so thoroughly captured by something as fundamentally old-fashioned as an unadorned series of books. At a time when purveyors of children's culture insist that youngsters have no attention span – and that sex and cynicism are used to sell to those as young as 9 – children have become mesmerized by these 300-page books with only a few illustrations and good-vs.-evil plots.

While media executives insist that electronic bells and whistles are needed to hold even a baby's interest, millions of children have experienced the world of Harry Potter in silence, the stillness broken only by the rustle of pages turning. Their imaginations have been free to sketch Harry Potter as they see him.

Sadly, all of this is on the verge of being snatched away from us, the precious quiet irrevocably shattered by the click of e-commerce and the jingle of cash registers. So those romantics among us who made a midnight sojourn to their favorite bookstore, and those of us who waited more prosaically until morning, should savor our last opportunity to experience Harry and his pals unencumbered by commercial images.

It won't be long before our own, personal images of the young wizard and his world will be usurped by those features on a crush of back-to-school products. Then will come the film, with its \$100 million production budget, to guarantee that nothing having to do with Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is left to our imagination.

Finally, trade journals predict, Warner Bros. will spin the film into interactive games, toys, dolls, cartoons, and even a theme park.

Once the early merchandise appears, children reading Harry Potter for the first time will know what his world looks like before they even open the book. Once the film premieres, children will no longer assign their own cadence and movement to their favorite characters.

These lost opportunities wouldn't matter so much if other books were achieving this magnitude of popularity. But they aren't.

For most children, Harry Potter has been an oasis of silence in a barrage of cor-

porate noise. A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation shows that children consume an average of 40 hours of media a week outside of school. Most of this is electronic – television, videos, computers, and radio. As we bombard our children with images, words, and sounds that leave nothing to be imagined, we are transforming them from creators to reactors.

D. W. Winnicott (1896-1971) would have liked the Harry Potter books. Winnicott, a British pediatrician and psychoanalyst, died long before personal computers, cross-marketing, and video games. Linking creativity to mental health, Winnicott believed that children thrive in environments that have safe boundaries, but do not impinge on their ability to think and act spontaneously.

"Good enough" parenting, is how he described the desired delicate balance. A good-enough parent holds a baby tightly enough for the baby to feel secure and loosely enough for the baby to gesture. As a baby's gesture brings a response – a coo, a smile, a laugh from a parent – she learns the difference between what comes from her and what comes from others. As her spontaneous gestures and sounds generate warmth and approval from her parents, she learns that she is capable of evoking a response and of making good things happen.

For children whose parents hold them too tightly, or who flood them continually with stimuli and commands to react, the cost is high. They never learn to initiate action, or to affect the world they inhabit. They miss the essential human experience of creativity.

With the confluence of sophisticated electronic media technology and the glorification of the free market, it is difficult to provide children with the kind of environment Winnicott describes. American children are assaulted with the noise from advertising and the things it sells from the moment they wake up until bedtime. The space for their ideas, their own images, their interactions with print or pictures shrinks with every blockbuster children's film or television program – inevitably accompanied by toys, picture books, videos, tapes, and clothing.

The Harry Potter books provide a respite from a culture saturated by commercial, electronic media. Children get to exercise their own creativity as they interact with J. K. Rowling's imaginary world. They haven't needed Warner Bros. to visualize her words. They haven't needed a Harry Potter Magic Wand or a Find Your Way to the Chamber of Secrets computer game to enjoy the story. All they have needed was themselves and a book.



J. K. Rowling has changed the face of kiddie lit with her boy, Harry Potter.

It's not easy to resist the siren song of fame, power, and fabulous wealth. When she sold her first book, Rowling was an unemployed single mother. Still, some artists do hold out. Bill Watterson, creator of the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes," refused to sell the licensing rights. He has managed to resist the lure of an estimated \$10 million a year from product sales, and the world he created is still unfettered by greeting cards, pillow cases, and ceramic mugs. We enter it unencumbered by interpretations from producers, directors, actors, and art departments.

Rowling spent her 'tween and teen years isolated from the excesses of popular culture. When she was 9, her family moved near the Welsh border, close to Britain's Forest of Dean – rural, wild, and beautiful, rife with legends and relatively isolated from popular culture. In interviews, she speculates that the setting and the lack of things to do stimulated her imagination.

If only insight into the source of her own creativity had enabled Rowling to turn down the Warner Bros. millions. Harry Potter did not evolve from lifetime exposure to television, movies, and the products they sell. His roots are in the silence Rowling found in the Forest of Dean. He grew in a space she was allowed to fill with her own visions. He grew in the glorious experience endangered now more than ever – of listening intently to voices no one else has heard.

*Susan Linn is associate director of the Media Center of the Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston and an instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.*