



On Harry Potter and Whose Stories are Told

By Jamie Melton

In this audio story featured in the Spring 2021 issue of *Kaleidoscope*, teacher Jamie Melton ponders the question of whose stories are being told in our teaching and why.

There are four houses that students get sorted into at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the Harry Potter series. There is Gryffindor, the house of daring, nerve, and chivalry; Ravenclaw, the house of intelligence and wit; Hufflepuff, who are hardworking and loyal; and Slytherin, the house of cunning and ambition.

In college, I got to take a Harry Potter class for credit. It was awesome! When I took this class, it was structured—we read all seven books, and each book had a one-page writing assignment. For the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the writing assignment was about the sorting hat. We had to write ourselves into the story to show what house we'd sorted into and why—which makes a whole lot of sense to me. That's a really pivotal moment in that story.

For the second book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, the writing assignment was about choice. And this was at first really odd to me, because when I read *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, the story to me was about doing the right thing, no matter what.

So, the story centers around Harry searching out this monster, and at first he doesn't know what it is, and then he realizes it's this giant snake in the pipes of the school. And then at the climax of the story, his best friend's little sister, Ginny, vanishes.

And Harry goes into the Chamber of Secrets to rescue Ginny, who at this point, isn't even really a full-grown character; she's a plot device. And Harry rescues her anyway, even though he doesn't have a huge personal investment in this person, even though he doesn't realize that the bad guy is involved until he's in the middle of the whole escapade.

So he doesn't have a strong personal investment in the reason why he's fighting this horror. He does the right thing anyway. And that was really moving to me when I read this book.

So I'm getting this writing assignment and it's about choice and I'm like 'I don't know where this is coming from,' and it wasn't until I heard my professor's story that it started to make sense.

(1:50) The professor who was teaching the class was the head of the Engineering Honors Program and as part of his role, he lived in the dormitory with his students. There was an apartment built on the back for him and his wife and his two daughters, and he spent a lot of his time using his incredible powers of observation to socially engineer this community that was really supportive and wonderful. He had those powers of observation because of his own history as a child with sexual abuse. And he learned at a very young age to very quickly understand the motivations of the people around him in order to protect himself.

So when my professor read the story, the most powerful scene for him was when Harry is sitting across the table from Dumbledore, after the Chamber of Secrets rescue. And Harry is all freaked out because the whole book he's been the only person who can hear the snake and

everyone's been telling him "You're the Heir of Slytherin" and if we go back to book one in *Sorcerer's Stone* to that Sorting Hat moment, Harry asked the hat not to put him in Slytherin. He asked to be in Gryffindor and he's afraid that his choice overrode some truth that was inside of him.

And Dumbledore tells Harry in that moment, "Your choices matter. Your choice was very important, and if you would like proof, look at the sword that you pulled out of the hat," which, of course, is the sword of Godric Gryffindor.

This moment was so important for my professor because it meant that he could choose to be different than his family.

(3:12) So, as I'm sitting there listening to this story, I'm actually really annoyed! Because I'm sitting there thinking, 'did we even read the same book? I am a Harry Potter *nerd*. I read and write fanfiction, I know the books backwards and forwards, I can tell you what day of the week Harry had astronomy in his first year (it was Wednesday night, if you're curious). And I'm like, "What? This is an affront to my knowledge of Harry Potter, that we took such different things away from this book."

But I was also in graduate school to be a teacher. And as I thought about this, I realized that I was not actually in a class about Harry Potter. I was in a class about my professor's story about Harry Potter. And it made me think about my own teaching. I teach science, and I would really like to think that science is all objective and data driven. And it's not. I don't teach biology in my classroom; I teach my own story of biology. And I inherited that story; I actually inherited that story from my mom, who was my biology and my AP Biology teacher. So really I did not inherit it just in her classroom; I inherited it my whole life.

(4:15) And that's part of the story that I tell. And there's something really powerful about being part of that inherited story. I can talk to a biology teacher from California or a biology teacher from Maine and we use the same examples in our genetics problems. There's the white flower and the purple flower and the purple one is dominant; we all know this problem. There's something really inclusive about being part of that community that knows this story that we tell over and over again.

But choosing to tell these canonical stories also means that there are other stories, and there are voices that aren't being told, that aren't being included.

When I traveled to the Galapagos Islands, I expected to hear lots of stories about Darwin and the finches. Anyone who's taken any biology class lately has heard about the finches! But that wasn't the story the local

park rangers and scientists told. The finches are small and camouflaged and actually kind of obnoxious—they were always trying to steal our food when we were eating lunch.

It turns out that Darwin was actually way more interested in the mockingbirds, because there are fewer species and they're easier to tell apart. He bagged a bunch of finches almost as an afterthought and sorted them out when he got back to England.

(5:23) I heard this story and felt a similar kind of let-down that I had with the Harry Potter assignment about *Chamber of Secrets*; how did I, as a biology teacher, not know this story about the mockingbirds? But I knew the American education version of the story, not the Galapagos scientist version of the story. And it's really important to know that these aren't the same.

So if I'm telling my story of biology, whose stories of biology are getting left out? Whose voices are not part of my story? And that's the question that I'm still sitting with—whose stories are being told, and why?



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