

Lots of Magic in the Movies

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With the November release of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire and this weekend's opening of The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, parents may be debating whether these magic filled films are appropriate viewing for children.

The themes of both movies are similar. The main characters are children who had a relatively normal upbringing until they were exposed to an alternative world that they knew nothing about; and become key players in a battle between good and evil that began before the children entered the world.

“Children’s enjoyment of fantasy is not necessarily a cue that there is something terrible about children’s current circumstances or their psychological handling of reality,” said Rebekah Richert, a new assistant professor of psychology at UC Riverside who studies the intellectual development of children, especially as it relates to religion and fantasy. “Even adults fantasize that their lives are different and more exciting than the mundane existence that they live every day.”

In fact, she said preschoolers’ abilities to creatively imagine have been linked with a number of positive intellectual and social outcomes by social scientists, including higher intelligence and more developed social skills.

Some parents are concerned not with imaginary worlds in general, but with the specific content of certain fantastic worlds, such as magic, or disrespect for authority or the use of violence to resolve conflicts.

Richert, who has opened a Childhood Cognition Lab at UCR this year, said the research findings on the impact on children of fantasy are somewhat unclear.

“Children often enjoy fantastical possibilities, but are still able to bring their own sense of rationality to those worlds when they need to,” she said.

It is possible for children to confuse the fantasy world for the real one, Richert said. This is particularly problematic when discussing Harry Potter, because that fantastical world includes a number of realistic elements, such as the existence of the Muggle world in the stories, which gives a realistic feel.

“I’m not suggesting that Harry Potter is recruiting children for paganism, but I do think that children might be interested in the fact that there are people who call themselves witches in the real world,” Richert said.

In Harry Potter, both heroes and villains use magic to their own purposes. In the Chronicles of Narnia, the witch is always portrayed as evil. If parents prefer the authorial intent of C. S. Lewis to that of J. K. Rowling, they should be aware that children might need help seeing the religious metaphor embedded in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, Richert said. As with any kind of media, she advised parents to keep track of what their children see and take time to discuss their perceptions of it afterward.

Richert has made talking to children about their perceptions the center of her research program at UC Riverside. Before arriving at UC Riverside in July, she was a postdoctoral fellow in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University.

Source: UC Riverside

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