

Harry Potter likely to endure for generations, says literary expert

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Credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

With the release of the movie "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 1" on Nov. 19, the official telling of the story of the boy wizard is nearing its end. But Steven Herb, director of the Pennsylvania Center for the Book at Penn State, believes author J.K. Rowling's imaginative and well-crafted tale is likely to stay popular for generations to come.

"The cultural phenomenon aspect of it certainly raised up these books," said Herb, an education librarian and children's author. "But they are actually well constructed and well written, and they are outstanding examples of serial fiction. Who knows how to define a classic, but they will be around and read for a long time."

That phenomenon spawned by Rowling's seven novels and their accompanying film adaptations is not entirely uncommon in popular culture, but rare in literature.

Herb pointed to another pop culture icon that enjoyed near-hysterical popularity at its height but endures as it is adopted by new generations.

"An analogy I would give is there is only one generation who remembers where they were when they heard a particular Beatles song, but there are today millions of people who are still buying Beatles music," he said.

"The people who dressed up and stood in line for the books experienced the Harry Potter phenomenon firsthand, but many people will continue to experience those books for generations."

Some series, like the teen vampire romance *Twilight*, have experienced bursts of enormous popularity akin what the Harry Potter books sustained for more than a decade. Others, Herb said, such as the work of the Beat writers of the 1950s, were strongly embraced over a long period of time by particular cultural groups and became important pieces of American literature. Still others endure as their audience -- and the works' interpretations -- are redefined.

"Lewis Carroll and the Alice books -- I just don't think children are reading them much anymore, but mathematicians and computer scientists are," Herb said.

For Rowling's books, the archetypal tale of good versus evil should aid its longevity. But the complexity and depth of the books also broaden interest, Herb explained.

"There are lots of references to lots of types of literature. That's wonderful when you can spend time looking at it as an exciting adventure and spend time looking at it as something complex," he said.

"It's right for a third grader who reads it and thinks, 'My gosh, this is

what reading is all about,' and for someone who is looking at it in an academic setting and presenting a paper. That's a pretty amazing breadth if you think about it."

The well-received film adaptations also have served to work in concert with the novels to strengthen the franchise. Readers are naturally interested in the films, and moviegoers may in turn become interested in the books. Meanwhile, the release of a new film in the series spurs fans to revisit what they've already seen and read, Herb said.

"The two elements help to pull the consumer along," he said. "There are some people who see the movies and have no intention to read the books, but that is a rare group. I suspect it's much rarer than people who read the books but don't see the movies. And I've talked to people who will re-read from start to finish the previous six or all seven books before this new movie comes out."

The widespread interest in the novels is likely to be passed on to future generations as parents become eager to share their enthusiasm for the books with their children, a notion which bodes well for youth reading in general.

"I think people will want to share that experience," Herb said. "Interest in exciting literature is certainly a habit we want to share with our kids, because kids learn a lot more by what they are shown than what they are told. Having excitement for literature is a good model for kids. I don't think this will be too hard for people to do that with. Because it was such a broad readership and range of ages, I think this one will be stronger for the next couple generations than other fantasy fiction that goes through highs and lows."

The franchise's influence extends into the world of publishing and beyond as authors and their publishers seek to build on Rowling's

precedent.

"The influence is huge," Herb explained. "I'd be hard-pressed to name a fantasy author who isn't thinking in multiple volumes. There is more fantasy literature out there right now for middle school kids on up than any time I can remember in the 30 years I've worked in children's literature. Publishers are pushing for this, too, to find other authors who will capture the hearts and minds of the Harry Potter readers. Nobody has at that level, of course, but I don't think we could have predicted when the first Harry Potter book was written that this would have happened at all."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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