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Restricted Section: The Library as Presented in Harry Potter

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The Library as Presented in Harry Potter

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Abstract

The authors report on a content analysis of the conceptualization of the library and librarian in the books in the Harry Potter series. The analysis includes all mentions of the library, the librarian, and library materials, from all seven books of the series. Content examined includes the format and types of library materials mentioned, limitations on access to library materials, the image of the librarian, and the characters’ use of library materials. The analysis reveals that the library is presented as both a heavily guarded and censored area and also a place where the young heroes of the book have access to a world of information. The library is censored, for example, by the inclusion of a restricted section not always available to the young witches and wizards, but is also the source of important historical content, instructions for creating potions, and instructions for spells. The library is a place where the characters spend time when they are causing trouble or are about to break the rules. A comparison of the library, librarian, and library materials in the series to real world information sources, censorship, and the importance of libraries as public spaces is discussed.
Introduction

Librarians are always interested in the portrayal of libraries and librarians in literature and popular culture. Knowledge of the perceptions of our work informs our outreach efforts. Are librarians approachable? Do people know how librarians can assist with school work, research, or information seeking for an important questions? The *Harry Potter* series contains seven books. The usability of the library and issues of access to information and censorship are themes in these books that apply to the real world.

The initial mention of the characters Harry, Ron, and Hermione setting off for the Hogwarts library in the first *Harry Potter* book involves researching information on Nicolas Flamel, an activity definitely not related to their schoolwork. They lack a search strategy and Hermione resorts to “pulling them [books] off the shelves at random” (Rowling, 1999, p. 198). The Hogwarts library is huge, the volume of information is overwhelming, and the characters have determined asking the librarian, Madam Pince, is out of the question. When examining the role of the library and librarian through the seven books in the series, these types of themes emerge as commonplace. The library is a vast repository of knowledge, a place characters go to find needed information, as well as a place of restrictions and limitations, lorded over by an unhelpful librarian. The library, as depicted in the popular *Harry Potter* series, fulfills a dual role as both a guarded and censored area and a place in which the characters have the ability to access a world of information.

Literature Review

Librarians and academics studying libraries have spilled a great amount of ink over image and the portrayal of libraries and librarians in literature. Olên (1987) found a mostly negative image of librarians and the work done in the library in her study of the topic. In a study
looking at librarians in mystery and detective novels, Brown-Syed and Sands (1997) find a variety of portrayals of librarians, some positive and some negative, and note that most of these portrayals do reveal some aspects of the actual work done in libraries. Peresie and Alexander (2005) examined young adult literature for librarian stereotypes and found librarians largely portrayed as negative or neutral characters in literature. Robinson (2007) also takes note of librarians’ obsession with their image and looks at a few portrayals in popular culture, concluding that the stereotypical image of the librarian is still present, but likely to change.

Librarians have taken note of the intersections between the *Harry Potter* series and their work, although they have not fully explored the issue of how the library and librarian are portrayed in the series. Harmeyer (2008) detailed a reference interview involving a student researching Harry Potter and gathering resources on J.K. Rowling. Stover (2001) described how the popular series could be utilized to help children learn about the organization of a library. Bennett (2008) comes closest to addressing the image issues when utilizing the *Harry Potter* series, among other literary works, to create a personality assessment for librarians. Nevertheless, these articles fail to examine the full scope of the library and librarian’s role and portrayal in the series.

**Method**

In the course of this study, each of the seven Harry Potter novels was read and every mention of the library or librarian was examined. Specially, each instance of the word “library,” “libraries,” “library book,” “librarian,” and “Madam Pince” was noted and further examined. Each of these instances were examined as referring to the library at Hogwarts, another library, Irma Pince, a librarian or library worker other than Pince, library books, and library materials aside from books. The use and issues associated with the library were also examined. Mentions of the library were evaluated as to whether or not students utilized the library for course assignments or to obtain information or solve a problem unrelated to schoolwork.
Censorship and accessing forbidden materials also formed a factor in the evaluation of
mentions of the library.

**The Library: Statistics & Descriptions**

In the seven books in the *Harry Potter* series, the library at Hogwarts is mentioned 57
times, while other libraries are only referenced three times. The librarian, Irma Pince, comes up
a total of 11 times. Library books are referred to in 28 instances during the series. In these
mentions, students are displayed using the library for course-related assignments 13 times. In
contrast, use of the library for solving problems and finding information not related to course
assignments come up 33 times in the series. Ten instances occur involving accessing
censored, restricted, or forbidden materials. An additional observation, not known or considered
prior to this study, is that students are displayed using the library—or saying they are going to
use the library—as an excuse five times. Figure 1 shows totals for each book for each category
considered in this study.

![Figure 1. Mentions Per Category Per Book](image)
The fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, contains the most mentions of the library--18-- of any of the books in the series. At least seven of these library occurrences can be attributed to information seeking for the tasks of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Figure 2 shows the proportion of the seven-book series each book provides in terms of pages. Figure 3 shows a similar pie chart, demonstrating the number of mentions of the Hogwarts library in each book.

![Figure 2. Pages Per Book](image)

![Figure 3. Hogwarts Library Mentions Per Book](image)
The Hogwarts library is described as huge, containing “tens of thousands of books; thousands of shelves; hundreds of narrow rows” (Rowling, 1998, p.198). A quiet atmosphere reigns in this locale, as the characters “dropped their voices as they entered the muffled stillness of the library” (Rowling, 2000; 1999, p. 163). The characters recognize the library as a vast repository of knowledge, although they are not always skilled at navigating through it. While in the library, Ron exclaims at one point: “I bet there’s a book somewhere in here telling you how to get past a giant three-headed dog”(Rowling, 1998, p. 247). In this instance, Ron acknowledges the huge amount of information the library holds, implying that the useful information is “somewhere,” but offering few suggestions as to where to seek the needed knowledge.

**Library Materials**

The material most often associated with the Hogwarts library are books, which appear magical like other aspects of the school for witches and wizards. During Harry’s clandestine visit to the library’s Restricted Section in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the book he attempts to pull off the shelf screams at him and Harry flees (Rowling, 1999, p. 205-207). In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Hermione checks out a book from the restricted section which “let out a ghostly wail”(Rowling, 2005, p. 381) when she puts the book in her bag. The Hogwarts students are able to place holds on books, as in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Hermione complains of the two-week waiting list for a copy of *Hogwarts, A History* (Rowling, 2000;1999, p. 146-147). In addition to the book collection, the Hogwarts library also has a periodical section, consisting of old editions of the wizarding newspaper *Prophet*, which Hermione utilizes in the sixth book (Rowling, 2005, p. 538). The library at Hogwarts appears limited to a print collection of books and periodicals as no other items in the library collection emerge in the course of the series.
The Librarian

Throughout the book series, the figure of Irma Pince, the librarian, emerges as the unfriendly and unhelpful guardian of the Hogwarts library. Madam Pince is described as “a thin, irritable woman who looked like an underfed vulture” (Rowling, 2000; 1999, p. 163). She takes her duties seriously and reacts strongly when she perceives rule breaking or damage to books. The librarian, in particular, appears more fond of books than the Hogwarts students. A true guardian of the books, Madam Pince “prowled the aisles menacingly, breathing down the necks of those touching her precious books” (Rowling, 2003, p. 538). In Harry Potter and the Order of the Phonix, Madam Pince chases Harry and Ginny Weasley out of the library for the crime of bringing chocolate into the library (Rowling, 2003, p. 654-656). Similarly, in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, Madam Pince becomes very upset when she notices Harry’s Potion book, which has handwriting all over it (Rowling, 2005, p. 305-308). These types of interactions are unlikely to endear Madam Pince to the Hogwarts students, and the students in turn avoid asking the librarian for help. On one occasion, in desperation Harry does ask the librarian for assistance in finding a way to stay alive underwater, but Madam Pince fails to be helpful (Rowling, 2000, p. 482).

In the course of the series, Madam Pince is never seen interacting with the Hogwarts professors, although Harry has a suspicion that the librarian is in a relationship with Argus Filch, the castle caretaker (Rowling, 2005, p. 305-308) and the two do appear together at Dumbledore’s funeral (Rowling, 2005, p. 640). These mentions form the only descriptions of Madam Pince with another Hogwarts staff member, and her association with the caretaker rather than with the professors suggests that the librarian was not regarded as a colleague by the Hogwarts teachers.

Madam Pince’s role in the library does not appear to be that of a professional educator. She is seen carrying a feather duster and stamping out a pile of books. We do not see her conducting lessons about the use of the library, nor do we have any suggestion that she may be
involved in the selection of the library materials. She is portrayed more as the guardian of the books than as an information professional or educator.

Uses of the Library: School Work Versus Extracurricular Activities

The Hogwarts students make use of the library as a place of study and to work on their assignments. Harry spends time at the library attempting to use the books available to help him learn Summoning Charms (Rowling, 2000, p. 316). Ron and Hermione make use of the library to work on Professor Umbridge’s assignments (Rowling, 2003, p. 538). Ginny Weasley also utilizes the library as a place to study when her O.W.L exams are approaching (Rowling, 2005, p. 536). These occurrences display Hogwarts students using the library as a place of study and a place to complete course assignments. The library’s collection appears to provide relevant information for students working on their assignments and the students appear able to access this type of information without trouble.

The Hogwarts library often turns up as a place characters go to find information or solve problems unrelated to their coursework. Despite the unfriendly librarian, students are often shown going to the library when they are in need of information and this highlights the role of the library as a repository of knowledge.

When seeking information about how to raise and care for a dragon, Hagrid shows up at the Hogwarts library, although he is reluctant to share his purpose (Rowling, 1998, p. 229-230). Harry, Ron, and Hermione attempt to assist Hagrid with the appeal of the hippogriff Buckbeak by researching the cases found in library books (Rowling, 2003; 1999, p. 221). In Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Hermione reveals that her frequent time spent in the library involved researching house-elves and establishing the Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare (S.P.E.W.) (Rowling, 2000, p. 224). Harry often resorts to the library during the Triwizard Tournament, hoping to find information that will aid him in completing the tasks, although he leaves disappointed more often than once (Rowling, 2000, p. 338, p. 482, p. 573-574). The Hogwarts library is even suggested at as potential meeting place for Dumbledore’s Army,
although it is rejected because of the unwelcoming figure of Madam Pince (Rowling, 2003, p. 345). These examples display a use of the library and library materials not at all related to the established curriculum at Hogwarts. Nevertheless, the library possesses the resources to take the students beyond their course assignments and provide information to help with activities that might not always be sanctioned by the school. Figure 4 graphically depicts the proportions of library use for course assignments and library use for other purposes.

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**Accessing Forbidden Materials**

The most outward display of limitations and censorship in the Hogwarts library is the Restricted Section. This portion of the library collection contains books of Dark Magic and in order to obtain a book from the Restricted Section, the student needs to have a signed permission slip from a teacher (Rowling, 1998, p. 198). These types of restrictions, however, do not necessarily dissuade the characters from accessing, or at least attempting to access, materials from the Restricted Section. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry visits the Restricted Section in his Invisibility Cloak (Rowling, 1998, p. 205-207). In *Harry Potter and the
Chamber of Secrets, Hermione is able to obtain a permission slip for a book in the Restricted Section on a flimsy pretext from Professor Lockhart (Rowling, 2000; 1999, p. 162). Despite the characters’ ability to get items from the Restricted Section through creative means, this portion of the library remains inaccessible to many students and the required permission slip acts as a barrier for students wanting to access the information in the Restricted Section.

However, even the Restricted Section has its limits, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione discover when they attempt to research Horcruxes. Even in the Restricted Section, Hermione fails to discover much on the topic (Rowling, 2005, p. 381) As Professor Slughorn tells Tom Riddle, “you’d be hard-pressed to find a book at Hogwarts that’ll give you details on Horcruxes” (Rowling, 2005, p. 496). Horcruxes are a banned subject at Hogwarts and nearly all mention of them has been taken from the Hogwarts library, a blatant example of censorship, as students are denied access to information on this subject. In the final book, Hermione relates that she discovered that the books on Horcruxes were merely removed from the library, not from the school, and she was able to obtain the books through a simple Summoning Charm (Rowling, 2007, p. 101-102). Hence, Hermione managed to get around the library’s restrictions and the school’s censorship with a relatively simple method, suggesting that the censorship on the topic was not truly designed to keep the determined from accessing the forbidden information.

Discussion

Books in the imaginary world of the Harry Potter series are magical and sometimes protected by spells. The Hogwarts library as presented in the seven books appears to have only print materials. In our real “muggle” world library or school media center, we can usually access many formats of print and audiovisual or electronic-based media. The limitations on format in the Hogwarts library may be due to the limited formats available in any setting in the wizarding world of Harry Potter.
Madam Pince, the Hogwarts librarian, is presented as a stereotypical librarian whose main purpose is to protect the library materials and to protect children from accessing materials for which they are not ready. In reality, today's school librarians, or school media specialists, take on the task of steering children to appropriate materials but they also must help them to discover new materials and expand not only their knowledge but their worldviews. According to Sipley (2003), “Maintaining intellectual freedom for students is a difficult task for school media specialists. They act in loco parentis and therefore must keep parents’ wishes in mind, mainly involving the protection of our students from information seen as inappropriate for them” (p. 57). Sipley (2003) describes how the fear of challenges from parents and school boards can lead to real-world restricted sections in school media centers: “Some have begun limiting young students to read only from the ‘easy’ section and requiring written parental permission before any aged child may read books such as Judy Blume’s Forever, or Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird” (p. 57). In this sense, the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library reflects what is sometimes an unfortunate reality.

Libraries are important public spaces for their constituent populations. A school media center is usually limited to the children and employees of that school, much like the Hogwarts library, but is still an important public space for that population. We see many examples of the Hogwarts library being useful for the lives—not just the school studies--of the series' young heroes. That the books contain 13 mentions of the library being used for course work but 33 instances of the library being used for other information purposes is perhaps a sign that J.K. Rowling sees the importance of libraries for real life. Leckie (2004) notes, “the growing concern among some scholars and librarians that a serious consideration of the meaning of the library to its users and its role as a place that is central to their lives has been seriously eroded or lost in some cases” (p. 235). School librarians play an important role in making the school media center a welcoming place of learning for students so that they will continue to see the library’s importance and usefulness as they become adults. Sipley (2003) notes that students often
keep their “school life” and “life” separate. “In order for students to become truly informed, they must learn to bring their social and political interests into the library, and to use their information literacy skills to critically analyze information bombarded at them in everyday situations” (p. 59). The character Hermione provides a fantastic example of using the library to pursue her own interests and to participate in society when she uses the library to seek and evaluate information for her socially aware organization S.P.E.W.

Conclusion

On first glance, the portrayals of the library and the librarian in the *Harry Potter* series appear stereotypical. The Hogwarts library is a vast repository of knowledge, containing mostly books, and is guarded by an unhelpful, unfriendly librarian. Censorship and restrictions on certain portions of the collection act as barriers to students attempting to access the vast resources. However, the library also emerges as a place the characters go when in need of information - and not necessarily information related to their coursework. Even after the characters Harry, Ron, and Hermione decide not to return to Hogwarts, they recognize the usefulness of the information found in the resources at the Hogwarts library. As Hermione decides which books to take on their journey, Ron sarcastically states, “I forgot we’ll be hunting down Voldemort in a mobile library” (Rowling, 2007, p. 95). While Ron made his comment in jest, over the course of the series, the characters accessed a lot of information, using library resources to assist in their adventures and misadventures with dark magic, wizards, and magical creature. In fact, despite its limitations, the library enables the characters Harry, Ron, and Hermione in their extracurricular adventures, helping to providing them with the information and skills needed to fight dark magic and take down Lord Voldemort.

The characters in the *Harry Potter* series use the library in spite of an unapproachable, unfriendly librarian. The library of Hogwarts is a place that does not particularly welcome students. This is not a positive portrayal. Although the library and librarian are portrayed
negatively, the importance of access to information is apparent in the series. This, to a librarian, is a positive message.
Works Cited


