

Why Everyone Should Read Harry Potter

Tales of the young wizard instill empathy, a study finds



By Bret Stetka on September 9, 2014
Adapted by Valia Skivalaki, March 24, 2020

**SCIENTIFIC
AMERICAN**

As the familiar story goes, not long ago there was an orphan who on his 11th birthday discovered he had a gift that set him apart from his preteen peers. I'm referring to the young wizard Harry Potter, protagonist in author JK Rowling's wildly popular fantasy book series. While it might sound far-fetched, new research suggests that Rowling's world of house-elves, half-giants and three-headed dogs has the potential to make us nicer people. With over 450 million copies sold, Harry Potter is the best selling book series of all time. A growing body of evidence suggests that the pro-Potter camp might be on to something, and that reading Rowling's work, at least as a youth, might be a good thing.

A new study published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* found that reading the Harry Potter books in particular has similar effects, likely in part because Potter is continually in contact with stigmatized groups. The "muggles" get no respect in the wizarding world as they lack any magical ability. The "half-bloods," or "mud-bloods" – wizards and witches descended from only one magical parent – don't fare much better, while the Lord Voldemort character believes that power should only be held by "pure-blood" wizards. He's Hitler in a cloak.

The research group, led by professor Loris Vezzali of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia in Italy, conducted related studies. In one of them, 34 elementary school children were given a questionnaire assessing their attitudes towards immigrants, a group frequently stigmatized in Italy. The children were then divided into two groups that met once a week for six weeks to read Harry Potter passages and discuss it with a research assistant. One group read passages relating to prejudice, like the scene where Draco Malfoy, a shockingly blond pure-blood wizard, calls Harry's friend Hermione a "filthy little Mud-blood." The control group read extracts unrelated to prejudice, including the scene where Harry buys his first magic wand. A

week after the last session, the children's attitudes towards out-groups were assessed again. Among those who identified with the Harry Potter character, attitudes toward immigrants were found to be significantly improved in children who'd read passages dealing with prejudice. The attitudes of those who'd read neutral passages hadn't changed.

Of course, there are many factors that shape our attitudes toward others: the media, our parents and peers, religious beliefs. But Vezzali's work supports earlier research suggesting that reading novels as a child can have a positive impact on personality development, social skills and **empathy** – empathy being defined more or less as the ability to alternate between different perspectives on a particular person or situation.

“Unfortunately the news we read on a daily basis tells us we have so much work to do!” Vezzali said. *“But based on our work, fantasy books such as Harry Potter may be of great help to educators and parents in teaching tolerance.”* Vezzali's group plans to continue investigating the impact of literature in the hopes of one day having a real cultural impact.



*You can do this online,
check Mrs Valia's site.*

Answer the questions:

1. What does new research on Harry Potter books suggest?
 - a. They are silly.
 - b. They are the best selling books of all times.
 - c. They are wildly popular.
 - d. They may make us nicer people.
2. Why don't the 'muggles' get any respect in the wizarding world?
 - a. Because they are the best.
 - b. Because they are the worst.
 - c. Because they don't have any magical abilities.
 - d. Because they have super powers.
3. What did the questionnaire by professor Vezzali investigate?
 - a. The immigrants.
 - b. The attitudes of local children towards immigrants.
 - c. Immigration attitudes.
 - d. The attitudes of local children towards reading books.

4. What were the results of the children who had read Harry Potter passages?
 - a. Their attitudes had not changed.
 - b. The children were bored.
 - c. Their attitudes towards immigrants had improved.
 - d. Their attitudes towards their parents had improved.

5. Reading novels as a child ...
 - a. shapes our attitudes towards others.
 - b. has a positive impact on us.
 - c. makes us more sociable.
 - d. may be of great help.

