

## Escape and Consolation: Narrative Voice and Metafiction in the *Harry Potter* Series

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This article sets out to examine narrative voice in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) as well as the presence of metatextual and metafictional elements in her novels. Special attention will be paid to Tom Riddle's diary, which first appears in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), and the book of fairy tales and companion to the series, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (2007). While Rowling's seven-book series has been extensively discussed, the companion books that purport to be the books that the main characters read in the novels—*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001), *Quidditch Through the Ages* (2001) and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*—have not received the same amount of critical attention. Yet these and other examples of metadiegetic narratives provide thought-provoking insights into the series's commentary on the relationship between texts and readers, adults and children. Through a careful examination of Rowling's narrative voice and her use of metafiction, I argue that the author gives her sometimes dark, disturbing story a narrative frame that not only provides the reader with consolation and reassurance, but also offers a commentary on the importance of storytelling and children's literature. Metafiction thus makes Rowling's work more complex than we might assume, challenging its readers to navigate through different narrative levels and reflect on the very act of reading.

Keywords: J. K. Rowling; *Harry Potter*; *Tales of Beedle the Bard*; narrative voice; metafiction; children's literature

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## Escapismo y consolación: voz narrativa y metaficción en la saga *Harry Potter*

Este artículo analiza la voz narrativa y la presencia de elementos metatextuales y metaficcionales en las novelas de la saga *Harry Potter* (1997-2007), de J. K. Rowling,

prestando especial atención al diario de Tom Riddle, que aparece por primera vez en *Harry Potter y la Cámara Secreta* (1998), y al libro de cuentos complementario de la serie, *Cuentos de Beedle el Bardo* (2007). Mientras que se ha hablado mucho de los siete libros que componen la saga, los libros complementarios que pretenden ser los mismos que los protagonistas leen en las novelas—*Animales fantásticos y dónde encontrarlos* (2001), *Quidditch a través de los tiempos* (2001) y *Cuentos de Beedle el Bardo*—no han atraído el mismo nivel de atención por parte de los críticos. Sin embargo, estos y otros ejemplos de narrativas metadieéticas nos permiten entender mejor la representación de la relación entre texto y lector, adulto y niño, a lo largo de la saga. Mediante el análisis de la voz narrativa y la metaficción, argumento que, a pesar de que la historia que se cuenta es a veces oscura y perturbadora, la autora le otorga un marco narrativo que proporciona acompañamiento y seguridad a los lectores, además de una reflexión sobre la importancia de la literatura infantil y del arte de contar historias. Así pues, la metaficción aporta complejidad a la obra de Rowling y desafía al lector a viajar entre los diferentes niveles de la narración y a reflexionar sobre el acto de leer.

Palabras clave: J. K. Rowling; *Harry Potter*; *Cuentos de Beedle el Bardo*; voz narrativa; metaficción; literatura infantil

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the start of its publication, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has been praised for its tackling of disturbing issues, such as death, grieving, war and political conflicts, in a way that young readers can grasp. This, however, has also brought about harsh criticisms from parents who find the series's contents far too dark and disturbing for children. In the BBC documentary *J. K. Rowling: Harry Potter and Me* (Pattison 2001, 43:53), Rowling explains that a mother wrote her a letter complaining about the ending of the second book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), in which Harry confronts and kills a basilisk.<sup>1</sup> In response to this criticism, Rowling stated that "I'm not writing to make anyone's children feel safe" (Pattison 2001, 44:39). What these adult readers—and the author herself—seem not to be aware of is that, despite the darkness of its subject matter, the *Harry Potter* series does provide reassurance and consolation to its readers to a certain extent, thus conforming to the conventions of children's literature. This is achieved through Rowling's incredibly effective handling of narrative voice and narrative technique. In her study of narrative voice in children's fiction, Barbara Wall affirms that "loveliness and ugliness, sadness and delight, comedy, tragedy and horror are all part of life, and might all appropriately be part of fiction for children, provided that the voice of the narrator, the voice which presents these things to children, is a voice which speaks to them with love and respect" (1991, 273). We therefore need to pay attention not only to *what* is being told, but also *how* it is being told. In the case of children's literature, it is of the utmost importance that (adult) narrators address their (child) narratees in a way that reflects an appropriate relationship between adult and child. Indeed, although children's literature is and has always been characterised by its experiments in narrative voice, the vast majority of narrators of children's literature are reassuring and friendly adult voices that make unpleasant experiences palatable to child readers. Rowling's narrator is no exception, as the first section of this article aims to demonstrate.

The second section, on the other hand, looks into how the presence of metatextual and metafictional devices in the series temporarily challenges the reliability and the authority of Rowling's narrator, only to reaffirm these qualities in the end. This not only shows that Rowling's narrative technique conforms to and reinforces children's literature conventions, but it also provides insight into the discourse on books, reading, storytelling and the relationship between author and reader that the novels endorse. This discourse is articulated by means of two narrative devices commonly used not only in children's fiction, but also in fantasy novels: metafiction and metalepsis.

In light of this analysis, I argue that metatextuality and metafiction provide the author with the opportunity to build a discourse on the functionalities of texts,

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<sup>1</sup> In the second book, life in Hogwarts is disrupted by a mysterious monster whose victims are found petrified or dead. Legend has it that the founder of Slytherin house built a chamber in the castle, known as the chamber of secrets, to be the home of a monster that would purge Hogwarts of students who were not pure-blood witches and wizards. In Harry's second year of school, this monster, which is revealed to be a basilisk that kills everyone who looks it directly in the eye, is unleashed again by the heir of Slytherin, i.e., Lord Voldemort.

storymaking and storytelling in her novels, which concludes with the questioning of and a warning against those narratives that purport to be objective, such as news stories, diary entries and biographies, among others. This is best illustrated in Rowling's novels by journalist Rita Skeeter's outrageously sensationalist stories, Gilderoy Lockhart's deceptive memoirs and Tom Riddle's manipulative diary. By contrast, the *Harry Potter* series highlights the value of those texts that do not claim to be telling the truth and do not demand blind acceptance from the reader, like children's stories and fairy tales, as exemplified by the metafictional narrative *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. The disruption of narrative levels thus serves to explore the relationship between texts and their readers and, while Rowling depicts the act of reading fiction as enlightening and harmless, she shows how reading self-proclaimed *objective* narratives requires special training in order to become a critical reader. This, therefore, reaffirms the value of what Rowling is doing—writing fiction. At the same time, it ensures that the authority of the adult storyteller remains unquestioned and that the acceptable separation of and relationship between adult storyteller and (implied) child reader remain firmly in place.

## 2. THE NARRATOR'S VOICE

In the *Harry Potter* series, the worlds of children and adults collide and are constantly at odds with each other. The series features vicious adult characters that do not flinch from abusing children physically and psychologically, like Harry's nemesis Lord Voldemort, corrupt Ministry of Magic bureaucrat Dolores Umbridge or the werewolf Fenrir Greyback. Yet the child/adult conflict is framed by Rowling's markedly adult narrator, who treats her child protagonist and her narratee in a way that reflects a relationship of friendliness and complicity between the two age groups. Furthermore, the novels depict horrifying, and even tragic, events in Harry's life, focusing on such unsettling issues as bullying, child abuse and death. However, the friendly, reassuring, third-person voice of an adult who easily identifies with the child provides the consolation that is traditionally expected from children's books. In his essay "On Fairy Stories," J. R. R. Tolkien stated that fairy stories must provide escape from and consolation for readers' unfulfilled desires, ambitions and fears ([1947] 2008, 73), and this certainly applies to most works of children's literature. Harry's adventures are framed by Rowling's comforting tone and her narrative reliability. This is not to say that the adult narrator's authority is never threatened by the presence of unreliable intradiegetic character-narrators in Rowling's own narrative, like Tom Riddle or Rita Skeeter, who exhibit less benevolent interactions between texts and their readers. However, their fictional narratives ultimately reassert the credibility of Rowling's narrator and thus reinforce the view of the adult storyteller as an appropriate, and appropriately reliable, voice to speak to a child.

Rowling's narrative voice has been described as providing a "third person *limited* omniscient view" (Granger 2009, 26; italics in the original). The narrator in *Harry*

*Potter* is omniscient inasmuch as she knows everything that is going on in and out of Harry's mind: "we see all the action in the books as if there were a house-elf sitting on Harry's shoulder with a minicam. This obliging elf can also tell us everything Harry is thinking and feeling in addition to showing us what he sees around him" (Granger 2009, 27).<sup>2</sup> This perspective, though, is limited, because much of the time "we don't see any more than Harry sees" (Granger 2009, 27), with a few exceptions like the opening chapters of *Philosopher's Stone* (1997), *Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Half-Blood Prince* (2005a) and *Deathly Hallows* (2007), which describe events in which Harry is not present.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Granger also points out that "because we're not restricted to Harry's narration, it *seems* as if we're seeing a larger bit of the story than if Harry just told it himself" (Granger 2009, 27; italics in the original), and hence the illusion of omniscience created by Rowling's narration. As we will see, this illusion is fundamental to the narrative misdirection that characterises the seven books, a point to which I will return in due course.

When the narrator is inside Harry's mind, Rowling often uses narrated monologue to represent Harry's consciousness, among other types of figural narration. Narrated monologue is "a character's mental discourse in the guise of the narrator's discourse" (Nikolajeva 2002a, 178), a term first coined by Dorrit Cohn in *Transparent Minds* (1983). According to Cohn, narrated monologue can be regarded "as the moment when the thought-thread of a character is most tightly woven into the texture of third-person narration" (111). The following passage exemplifies this technique: "And what were Ron and Hermione busy with? Why wasn't he, Harry, busy? Hadn't he proved himself capable of handling much more than them? Had they all forgotten what he had done? Hadn't it been *he* who had entered that graveyard and watched Cedric being murdered, and been tied to that tombstone and nearly killed?" (Rowling 2003, 13; italics in the original). Despite being in the third person and presented as part of the narrator's discourse, these are clearly Harry's thoughts, not the narrator's. Nonetheless, although this technique gives more prominence to the child's mind, it is still markedly different from first-person narration inasmuch as "the continued employment of third-person references indicates, no matter how unobtrusively, the continued presence of a narrator. And it is his *identification*—but not his *identity*—with the character's mentality that is supremely enhanced by this technique" (Cohn 1983, 112; italics in the original). I believe that, in children's literature, and in *Harry Potter* in particular, narrated monologue provides the child reader with an adult voice that is likable, among other things, because of how comfortably it identifies with the child. This not only brings the reader closer to the character, allowing them to have access to the character's thoughts and feelings, but it also provides comfort because it is an understanding adult voice that tells the story, an adult voice that seems not to have forgotten what

<sup>2</sup> Since the narrator's gender is never made explicit in the *Harry Potter* series, throughout this article it will be conflated with the female gender of the (implied) author for practical purposes.

<sup>3</sup> Only abbreviated titles of the *Harry Potter* novels are provided.

it is like to be Harry's age. Nikolajeva, on the other hand, sees narrated monologue as a covert way of transmitting ideology: "we may believe that authorial control is thus eliminated or at least subdued, while it is in fact merely hiding behind the characters. Covert didacticism and covert ideology can more easily be practiced through narrated monologue" (2002a, 180). A closer examination of Rowling's narrative voice should help clarify to what extent she practices covert ideology through her narrator.

Rowling's narrative manner and her use of language have been compared to those of previous British writers of children's literature, particularly Enid Blyton (Granger 2009, 44; Gallardo-C. and Smith 2003, 191) and Roald Dahl (Smith 2003, 82; Gallardo-C. and Smith 2003, 191). Wall describes Blyton's narrative manner as one that puts children's interests first with her "short sentences and simple vocabulary, the lack of detailed description of settings or analyses of situations or character, the dominance of dialogue, together with her remarkable skill in the manipulation of events and the management of pace" (1991, 190). Like Blyton's works, Rowling's narration also privileges the interests of the child and adolescent audience with her simplicity of style and her action-driven plot. Wall, however, also points out that Blyton's "restricting of what is told to what is known and understood by the children in her stories, the confining of the language and syntax to the level of their minds [...] has meant inevitably that Blyton's are books for children to grow out of, not to grow into" (1991, 193). This is certainly not the case with Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which as well as being enjoyed by children, also satisfies the needs of an adult readership. As Philip Nel explains, when asked for whom she writes—children or adults—Rowling replied, "Both. I wrote something that I knew I would like to read now, but I also wrote something that I knew I would like to have read at age 10" (2002, 174). Nel adds that "Like all great children's literature, Rowling's books offer pleasure for readers of any age because she does not write down to readers" (2002, 174-75). However, we cannot overlook the fact that, although Rowling's narrator does not talk down to readers, the novels are not devoid of adult moral commentary, which, significantly, is not verbalised by the narrator but by some of the adult characters themselves. This reveals Rowling's aim to please not only child readers, but also adults, especially perhaps those parents that might be watching over the child reader's shoulder.

The other classic children's author to whom Rowling has been compared is Dahl, because of the occasional presence of "tasteless" jokes and gross-out humour in the *Harry Potter* books and how the narrator seems to side with children. For example, in this passage Fred and George Weasley talk to their brother Ron about their latest invention, a magic fudge that allows students to skip classes by giving them a fever:

"Does it work?" enquired Ron hopefully [...].

"Well, yeah," said Fred, "your temperature'll go right up."

"But you get these massive pus-filled boils, too," said George [...].

"I can't see any boils," said Ron, staring at the twins.

"No, well, you wouldn't," said Fred darkly, "they're not in a place we generally display to the public."

"But they make sitting on a broom a right pain in the—" (Rowling 2003, 336)

Gross-out humour is clearly introduced for the child reader's enjoyment. Yet, the omission of a "bad" word in the last line reveals some self-consciousness about the presence of adults and a wish to please them as well. Thus, like Dahl's narrator who "puts himself in league with an implied child reader" (Wall 1991, 193), Rowling's encourages the child—and the childlike adult—to forget about political correctness, though always within acceptable limits.

The fact that Rowling's narrator privileges the interests of a child addressee is also apparent in her satirical portrayal of certain unsympathetic adult characters whose authority is undermined by Rowling's poignant sense of humour. This again echoes Dahl, who "ranges himself, not merely like Blyton, with children, but with children against adults. His stance shows him assuming that children will join with him and squirm delightedly at what many adults will find either nauseating or disgusting, will squirm all the more delightedly in fact because they do so with the approval of the adult who has joined them" (Wall 1991, 194). In *Harry Potter*, Harry's uncle Mr. Dursley, for instance, is scornfully described as "large and neckless"; Harry's aunt Mrs. Dursley is "horse-faced and bony"; and his cousin Dudley "blond, pink and porky" (Rowling 1998, 9). Such descriptions might be considered hilarious by some, but tasteless and offensive by others. Gregory G. Peppetone, for instance, declares that he does not share Rowling's fascination with "pop culture vulgarity" (2012, 224). Julie Cross, on the other hand, referring to Dahl in particular, acknowledges that the "opportunity for children to have the satisfaction of laughing at a 'stupid' adult is a long-standing mainstay of children's fiction. It is well established that children in middle childhood in particular enjoy the superiority and mastery aspect of seeing and laughing at the misunderstandings of naïve and stupid characters" (2008, 60-61). However, Cross also believes that "Dahl's world of grotesque caricatures can be too simplistic. [...] and there are strong elements of moral didacticism which may not be desirable" (2008, 59-60). Furthermore, she regards the "farce and slapstick revenge and even gross-out, scatological humour" in Dahl's books, elements that are also present in *Harry Potter*, as a lower form of humour, inferior to "the humour of incongruity, a more cognitive, higher type of humour" that, in Cross's view, can be found in other children's books like Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2008, 61). I have some reservations regarding Cross's negative view of Dahlesque forms of humour, for I believe they fulfil the very basic need of laughing at that which in real life creates anxiety. And, certainly, bullies and child abusers are a very real source of anxiety for children and parents in real life.

These are only a few among the features that Rowling's narrator has in common with those of other British children's writers that put the interests of an implied child reader first. However, as I have already suggested, even if the language and humour



prioritise children's preferences, adult expectations are also largely satisfied, albeit indirectly. Although the narrator in *Harry Potter* never moralises explicitly nor tells children how to behave, the novel is by no means devoid of both covert and overt adult moral commentary. It is enough to look at which characters are portrayed as stupid through humour. It is not the wise, authoritative teacher, the protective, biological parent or the studious child. Rather, the ridiculed characters are parents who spoil their children and kids who prefer video games to books, as in the following ironic passage about Harry's dumb cousin Dudley: "By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programmes he'd wanted to see and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer" (Rowling 1997, 35). Rowling's caricatures also indulge the adult's wish to criticise the way other people raise their children and complain about how terrible kids are these days. Humour thus functions as a device to indicate which characters represent undesirable qualities, and the reader is incited to share the narrator's disapproval. The appeal of Rowling's narrator is, therefore, twofold: on the one hand, she is likable to child readers because she sides with Harry against the bullies, and, on the other, adult readers can easily identify with her because the views she represents are markedly adult.

This takes me back to Nikolajeva's assertion that indirect, covert ways of inculcating ideology may prove to be more effective (2002a, 180). In *Harry Potter*, the "voice of adult values"—to use Perry Nodelman's expression (2008, 33)—is not only implicit and hidden behind narrated monologue and humorous passages, but it is also made explicit. Rowling never actually hides the fact that her novels have a didactic dimension. Although she has claimed that "[she] never think[s] in terms of What [*sic*] am I going to teach [children]?", she also admits that "undeniably, morals are drawn" (Rowling 2005b, n.p.). Significantly, explicit didacticism is not delivered by the narrator in *Harry Potter*, for this is generally regarded as writing down, which has fallen out of favour in contemporary children's fiction. In *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*, Nikolajeva explains how "the implied author is responsible for the ideology of the text" and that, in a mainstream (adult) novel, "a character can serve as the author's mouthpiece" (2002b, 4). However, she points out, in children's fiction, "the author's views cannot [...] be directly expressed through the child character without the narrative assuming an unnatural tone. A possible solution is to use an adult secondary character who will provide the desired opinions and counterbalance the child character's 'false' beliefs and assumptions" (2002b, 4). This is precisely the role that Dumbledore, the Hogwarts Headmaster, fulfils in *Harry Potter*. Acting as a mentor and a moral guide for Harry—and, in turn, the reader—Dumbledore is in charge of explaining, at the end of every book, the significance of the events that have taken place. This is why Granger compares him to the "Doctor ('learned man' in Latin) [who] explains the importance of good deeds in spiritual life" at the end of morality plays (2009, 176). Even in *Deathly Hallows*, when Dumbledore is already dead, Rowling adds a plot twist that allows him to talk to Harry from beyond the grave. This does not mean,



however, that adult authority goes unquestioned. Through the presence of metatextual and metafictional devices and fictional narrators inside her narrative, Rowling provides a complex commentary about texts, (adult) narrators and their reliability.

### 3. METAFICTION AND METALEPSIS

According to Patricia Waugh, “metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (1993, 2). In children’s fiction, metafictional elements acquire special connotations as they allow for a commentary on the relation between child reader and adult author, as well as for a pedagogical discourse on the function of books and reading in children’s lives. In her article “Fantastic Books,” Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario analyses this “material rather [than] allusive intertextuality—the book, ink, and paper” (2008, 209) that we often find in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century children’s books, such as Cornelia Funke’s *Inkheart* trilogy ([2003] 2004, 2005, [2008] 2009), Marcus Sedgwick’s *The Book of Dead Days* ([2003] 2011) and its sequel *The Dark Flight Down* ([2005] 2010) or Jonathan Stroud’s *Bartimaeus* trilogy ([2003] 2010a, [2004] 2010b, [2005] 2010c).<sup>4</sup> These are all children’s novels that use metafiction as a narrative device in order to turn the book into an object that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. I would also add Toni DiTerlizzi and Holly Black’s *The Spiderwick Chronicles* ([2003-2004] 2009), Michael Ende’s classic *The Neverending Story* ([1979] 1993), Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* ([1999-2006] 2011) and, of course, the *Harry Potter* series itself to this list.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of fictional narratives and narrators within the *Harry Potter* novels provides a commentary on textuality, storytelling and reading that is relevant to my analysis of the adult-child relationship in Rowling’s series. Veronica L. Schanoes states that, in *Harry Potter*, “certain passages regarding writing [...] seem to explicitly indicate a textual metaconsciousness” (2003, 138). We see this as early as the beginning of the first book, when the narrator’s reference to “the dull, grey Tuesday *our story starts*” (Rowling 1997, 7; italics added) breaks the fourth wall by addressing the reader outside the book. Another example can be found when Dumbledore and McGonagall leave baby

<sup>4</sup> Sedgwick’s fantasy novels are about a magician, Valerian, who has only four days left to live as a result of a deal he made with evil, and the information he needs to save his life is hidden in the *Book of Dead Days*. In the *Inkheart* trilogy by German writer Funke, Meggie’s father has a gift that makes fictional characters come to life when he reads aloud. Finally, Stroud’s fantasy trilogy is about a young magician, Nathaniel, who lives in an alternative historical reality where magicians are the dominant class.

<sup>5</sup> In *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, the Grace children move to a new house where they find a book, *Arthur Spiderwick’s Field Guide to the Fantastical World around You*, which reveals that fairies and other fantastical creatures really exist and are living among us. In Snicket’s series, as in *The Neverending Story*, the main characters encounter a book which has the same title as the book they are part of. Moreover, Snicket’s intrusive narrator keeps reminding the reader of the fact that he is writing a story.

Harry on the Dursleys' doorstep and McGonagall exclaims: "there will be books written about Harry—every child in our world will know his name!" (Rowling 1997, 15). Indeed, in the extradiegetic world, there *are* books about Harry, and there is probably not a single child who does not know his name, at least in English-speaking countries. Thus, from the beginning, this establishes a relationship between the fictional books inside Rowling's narration and the actual book the reader is holding in their hands. In addition, the fact that three of the fictional books that appear in Rowling's diegetic world—*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, *Quidditch Through the Ages* and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*—have been published as actual books in the extradiegetic world stresses this quality even more.<sup>6</sup> Metaleptic narrative devices, according to Poushali Bhadury, create pleasure not only for child readers, but for *all* readers in general, since they appeal to the "desire to be able to interact with the world of the text, or the desire to enter and co-create the storyworld" (2013, 10). With these three companions to the series, *Harry Potter* readers can indulge the fantasy of holding in their hands the same books that Harry, Ron and Hermione read. The appeal of metafiction and metalepsis may also thus account for the overwhelming success of Rowling's series among readers of all ages.

Nonetheless, in her analysis of metafiction and metalepsis in *Inkheart* and *The Neverending Story*, Bhadury also points out that these novels do not always portray the relationship between the child reader and the text as benign, but rather on certain occasions also show the dangers of reading (2013, 4). I argue that the same can be observed in *Harry Potter*, where narratives are represented as both enlightening—like Beedle the Bard's "The Tale of the Three Brothers" in *Deathly Hallows*—and deceptive—like Tom Riddle's diary in *Chamber of Secrets* or Rita Skeeter's sensationalist stories. These three fictional narratives sometimes lead the child protagonists to safety and sometimes to confusion and even mortal danger. Therefore, as Schanoes argues, "these passages of metaconsciousness openly force the reader to reflect upon the potential dangers and instability of the very text she holds in her hands" (2003, 138). Rowling's representation of narratives is, thus, inextricably linked to the construction of good and evil in her novels. As Schanoes adds, "Rowling's articulation of a uniquely complex understanding of morality is both dependent on and integral to the duplicitous nature of writing in her books" (2003, 131).

Tom Riddle's diary and its relationship with its readers is probably the best example of Gérard Genette's concept of metalepsis in Rowling's series, "an intrusion of the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse" (Genette 1980, 234-35). First introduced in *Chamber of Secrets*, this is a diary with apparently blank pages that Ginny Weasley—and, later, Harry—stumbles upon. Both characters soon learn that this is no

<sup>6</sup> *Fantastic Beasts* and *Quidditch* are two Hogwarts textbooks that characters read in the series. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, on the other hand, is a book of fairy tales for young witches and wizards that Hermione inherits from Dumbledore when the latter dies.

ordinary diary for, when they write in it, the diary writes back and tells them stories about dark secrets affecting Hogwarts. In the end, it is revealed that the diary actually contains a piece of Lord Voldemort's soul and is a memory of Voldemort's younger self—Tom Riddle—who manages to control Ginny through it, forcing her to open the Chamber of Secrets. Eventually, the memory of Tom Riddle that was trapped in the diary is liberated and threatens to feed on Ginny's life in order to bring his teenage self, and hence Lord Voldemort, back to life. Thus, in this case we are dealing with the relationship between diegetic characters (Ginny and Harry) and the metadiegetic world of the diary, on the one hand, and an intradiegetic narrator (Tom Riddle) who eventually transgresses narrative levels and invades the diegetic universe, on the other. Whereas in the book Harry's contact with Tom Riddle is conducted exclusively through writing, in the film adaptation the diary functions more like a portal: Harry is actually magically sucked into the diary and physically transported back in time to the events the diary narrates. As such, the intrusion of a diegetic character into an intradiegetic universe is clearer and more straightforward in the film than in the novel.

In her discussion of the *Inkheart* trilogy, Bhadury argues that “Funke does not paint a wholly rosy, uncomplicated and benign picture of the kinds of interaction that are possible between readers and texts. This is essential in charting a deliberate—and somewhat radically subversive—move away from the kinds of naive, trusting reader-text models other instances of children's metafiction provide” (2013, 4). Similarly, Rowling's *Harry Potter* series also presents this duality. In the case of Tom Riddle's diary, the written text is represented as potentially deceptive, unreliable and dangerous. It is precisely their trust in the initially personal and friendly tone of the diary that leads both Harry and Ginny to mortal peril. At the beginning, Tom Riddle teases Harry's curiosity and lures him in by telling him that the diary “*holds memories of terrible things. Things which were covered up*” (Rowling 1998, 179; italics in the original). Eventually, however, this all turns out to be a trap to get Harry to trust Tom Riddle, who finally reveals himself as Lord Voldemort's younger self. Significantly, during Harry and Riddle's confrontation, the latter mocks Ginny for having confided in the diary: “I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply *loved* me. *No one's ever understood me like you, Tom ... I'm so glad I've got this diary to confide in ... It's like having a friend I can carry around in my pocket...*” (1998, 228; italics in the original). Tom Riddle thus seems to be a kind, sympathetic narrator that promises to tell children amazing things that adults are hiding from them. Yet, as the outcome of Harry's experience with the diary suggests, narratives that are told by apparently kind, friendly, alluring strangers are not to be trusted blindly. Other similar, albeit more satirical, examples of unreliable intradiegetic narrators in the series are Gilderoy Lockhart and Rita Skeeter. Lockhart, who brags in his books about all the extraordinary things he has done, turns out to be a fraud, an incompetent wizard who became famous by stealing the credit for other people's achievements. When he is found out by Harry, Lockhart simply tells him that “books can be misleading” (Rowling 1998, 220). Similarly, Rita Skeeter is the author

of numerous fake news and manipulated interviews that spread lies about Harry and Dumbledore.

The presence of all these unreliable narratives shows that the relationship between reader and text is not always a benign one, and Rowling's series provides plenty of examples of what Bhadury calls "models of bad readership" (2013, 3), i.e., cases where characters do not question the information that they find in books nor the narrators' authority, which always leads to dire consequences. As Bhadury explains by reference to *Inkheart*, "if we consider writing to be one of the most important forms of (adult) power, here Funke seems to be making a radical observation regarding the possible limits of adult authority" (2013, 5). This, I argue, also applies to Rowling's series. It might be claimed that the fact that Rowling is constantly underlining the unreliability of narratives and of apparently friendly narrative voices calls into question the trustworthiness of her own narrative. In my view, however, the presence of metatextual narratives in Rowling's series does not aim to discredit the figure of the storyteller. As the examples I have provided suggest, in *Harry Potter* unreliability is linked to "official narratives, [which] despite a pretense of accuracy, objectivity, and coherence, are revealed to be made of unreliable, arguable assumptions and manipulative misinterpretations" (Schanoes 2003, 138). With characters like Rita Skeeter and Dolores Umbridge, who while not a writer, is also guilty of manipulating information, Rowling seems to be warning her readers against reading official narratives without applying acute critical skills, a quality that is most often embodied by Harry's best friend Hermione.

Rowling's critique, however, does not seem to include fiction. Schanoes's article was published in 2003, four years before *Deathly Hallows*, which includes the fairy tale for witches and wizards "The Tale of the Three Brothers." Therefore, the one example of metafiction in the *Harry Potter* saga which involves commentary on reading fictional narratives does not appear in her discussion. Still, I concur with Schanoes when she speculates that "fiction does not rely on an allegedly objective authority and does not demand blind acceptance; rather, the success of an unequivocally fictional narrative depends on a complicity between writer and reader, a willing suspension of disbelief. Perhaps the collusion between writer and reader required by fiction renders it harmless in Rowling's schema" (2003, 143). Her guess is confirmed in *Deathly Hallows* with Beedle the Bard, a fictional storyteller who "lived in the fifteenth century" (Rowling 2008, xiii) and wrote stories for wizarding children. Beedle the Bard could be the Charles Perrault or the Geoffrey Chaucer of Rowling's magical world, except that his fairy tales are told from the point of view of witches and wizards. Granger, for instance, emphasises the resemblance between "The Tale of the Three Brothers" and Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" (2009, 181). On the other hand, in Rowling's introduction to *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, it is said that "much of his life remains shrouded in mystery" (2008, xiii), which is also reminiscent of William Shakespeare.

This intradiegetic storyteller does much more than just reinforce one of the main moral lessons in the series, the fact that attempting to escape death ultimately leads to

self-destruction. Beedle's tale also provides a commentary on narrative and, specifically, on narratives aimed at young readers. When Harry, Ron and Hermione first hear "The Tale of the Three Brothers" at Mr. Lovegood's house, the latter insists that the story actually happened and the Deathly Hallows—the three magical objects created by Death that appear in the tale—really exist. Hermione, the most rational of the three, dismisses the idea as "completely ridiculous" (Rowling 2007, 334). Even Ron, who is less given to critical thinking than Harry and Hermione, also expresses his disbelief: "that story's just one of those things you tell kids to teach them lessons, isn't it? 'Don't go looking for trouble, don't pick fights, don't go messing around with stuff that's best left alone! Just keep your head down, mind your own business and you'll be OK'" (2007, 336). Yet, in the end, both Ron and Hermione are proven wrong. Beedle's story is indeed a cautionary tale with fantasy added to make the story more attractive to children, but it does turn out to be based on real facts. Thus, not only does "The Tale of the Three Brothers" contain truth, but it also proves to be crucial in the denouement of the series. Similarly, in the earlier *Chamber of Secrets*, Harry's History of Magic teacher tells students that the legend about the Chamber of Secrets is "such a very *sensational*, even *ludicrous* tale," "a tale told to frighten the gullible," as opposed to "solid, believable, verifiable *fact*!" (1998, 113-15; italics in the original). In the end, it turns out that this legend was also true and the accepted history was in fact a false account, manipulated by a former Hogwarts headmaster to save his own reputation. I read this as an affirmation of the potential of fictional stories—and particularly children's stories, folklore and fairy tales—to transmit knowledge without necessarily claiming to hold the absolute truth as other types of narratives masquerading as history or fact do.

Consequently, this does not contradict but rather affirms what Rowling is doing: she is also telling a fictional story from which truth and knowledge can be gained, yet with no pretence of absolute authority. I do not, therefore, believe that the presence of metadiegetic unreliable narratives in the series suggests that Rowling's narrator is also unreliable. Unreliability and danger in Rowling's fictional world are in fact associated with narratives claiming to be objective, not with fiction. There certainly are character-narrators in *Harry Potter* that contradict the adult narrator's account, such as Rita Skeeter, whose stories for the news media viciously distort the "truth" which is, after all, the narrator's version of the story, but they are so over-the-top that the reader knows from the beginning that she is not to be trusted. The effect created by these metadiegetic narratives is therefore mostly satirical and does not, in my opinion, challenge the credibility of Rowling's narrator. It certainly cannot be overlooked that Rita Skeeter's lurid account of Dumbledore in *Deathly Hallows* actually contains much truth, but even then, Rowling gives the Headmaster the chance to explain his own story, and it is *his* account that prevails in the end.

Although Rowling's narrator is reliable, it is true that, as Schanoes explains, she uses generic conventions to confuse and fool the reader, and it is relevant to refer back to narrative misdirection at this point. For example, the characterisation of Severus

Snape is deliberately misleading. He has “the dark looks of a gothic villain. By all conventional narrative cues, Snape’s nastiness should indicate that he is a villain of the deepest dye. But Snape is not evil. Snape is a good guy who protects Harry on several occasions and risks his own life in the fight against Voldemort” (Schanoes 2003, 132). Certainly, Rowling’s narrator constantly makes the reader see that appearances are deceptive and that people—and objects—are sometimes not what they seem to be. For example, at the end of *Philosopher’s Stone*, when Harry confronts evil Professor Quirrell, whom he had believed to be harmless, “Quirrell mocks Harry, and, by extension, Rowling mocks her reader for being taken in by a particularly sly combination of her own writing and her use of genre conventions” (Schanoes 2003, 131). The same thing happens in *Goblet of Fire* when Professor Mad-Eye Moody is revealed to be Barty Crouch Jr. under the effects of Polyjuice Potion, which gives the drinker the physical appearance of another person. Here, Rowling again plays with the reader’s expectations and prejudices and makes them realise that they had wrongly associated madness and eccentricity with evil doing. I insist, however, that this does not make Rowling’s narrator unreliable, but intentionally and playfully misleading. At the end of every book, the truth is always revealed and any loose ends are neatly tied up at the end of the series, when all the different pieces of the story come together. There is nothing in the text that suggests an alternative outcome, as happens in unreliable narratives. In *Harry Potter*, any attempt to mislead the reader is only temporary, and the version of the adult narrator is ultimately reasserted, which takes me back to the sense of security or, in Tolkien’s words, the escape and consolation that the series ultimately conveys.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As Frank Serafini et al. put it, “the embedding or nesting of narrative challenges young readers to understand distinctions among the various levels of a story and the very boundaries between fiction and reality” (2018, 313). Furthermore, they add, “complexity is not just a factor of the length of a text nor the selected vocabulary. As the narrative structures, visual images and design features offered in contemporary texts grow more complex, we need to foster strategies and approaches for helping young readers navigate and understand them” (318). In this article, we have seen how metafiction is also a way of complicating the act of reading, for it encourages readers not only to distinguish between the different narrative levels, but also to reflect on both the potential value and the potential dangers of the text they hold in their hands. In the case of Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, the author’s use of metatextual elements clearly stresses the importance of reading critically, especially when it comes to so-called official narratives. Reading fiction, on the other hand, and particularly reading children’s stories and fairy tales, is portrayed as harmless and enlightening. This is revealed in the last book when “The Tale of the Three Brothers” plays a crucial part in the saga’s denouement: not only does



it convey the ultimate teaching of the whole *Harry Potter* series, but it also turns out to be instrumental in Harry's final defeat of Voldemort. Furthermore, it can be inferred that reading fiction in *Harry Potter* is linked not to rationality, but to emotions. It is certainly not a coincidence that Dumbledore gives a copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* to Hermione, the epitome of what Bhadury calls the "good reader" (2013, 14) in the series, hoping that she will be able to decipher its meaning and significance. However, Hermione's initial overly rational interpretation of the tales as being simply children's stories fails to uncover the secret. It is only when the protagonists open their minds and understand that the basis of all children's stories is rooted in reality that they finally get on the right track to discovering that the Deathly Hallows are real and that without them they cannot defeat Voldemort.

Thus, unlike other authors such as Ende or Funke, Rowling always portrays the relationship between children's fiction and its readers in a positive light, which in turn reasserts the value of the activity she herself engages in as a writer. In Rowling's children's books, the relationship between (adult) narrator and (child) narratee is not based on the latter's submission to the former's authority, but rather it is always a positive and friendly one. Although the adult narrative voice clearly occupies a position of superiority from which she transmits knowledge to the child narratee, she also identifies easily with the child inside the book and the child outside the book, for whom she also provides pleasure and escapism by means of humour, playful narrative misdirection and metafiction.

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