

The Wherefores Story

Ratiocinator Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus
(Never Tickle a Sleeping Accountant)

Whatever Happened to Happily Ever After?

In *Witches Abroad*, one of the fantastically successful Discworld novels, the fantasy humorist Terry Pratchett expounds on the nature of stories. Contrary to popular opinion, he notes, stories aren't shaped by people. It's actually the other way round. Stories shape people. Stories exist independently of their tellers. They are 'great flapping ribbons of shaped space-time' that have coiled themselves around the universe from time immemorial. Stories are Darwinian, to boot. They evolve, they mutate, they compete. Only the fittest survive. The survivors, furthermore, channel all the tales, narratives, novellas et al that follow in their wake. Just as rainwater follows certain preordained paths as it flows down a hillside, and in so doing etches established aquatic routeways ever deeper, so to storytellers are condemned to rewrite the always already written:

This is called the theory of narrative causality and it means that a story, once started, *takes a shape*. It picks up all the vibrations of all the other workings of that story that have ever been.

This is why history keeps repeating all the time.

So a thousand heroes have stolen fire from the gods. A thousand wolves have eaten grandmother, a thousand princesses have been kissed. A million unknowing actors have moved, unknowing, through the pathways of story.

It is now *impossible* for the third and youngest son of any king, if he should embark on a quest which has so far claimed his older brothers, *not* to succeed.

Stories don't care who takes part in them. All that matters is that the story gets told, that the story repeats. Or, if you prefer to think of it like this: stories are a parasitical life form, warping lives in the service only of the story itself.¹

Pratchett, unfortunately, doesn't tell us how many stories there are. And he should know, because he's (re-)written enough of them. Personally, I reckon that there are only three telling tales out there: boy meets girl; boy loses girl; man hunts whale.² Yet, regardless of the predictability, or otherwise, of this numberless stock of narratives, I know how my story about the Harry Potter story is duty bound to end. With some kind of prediction about the future for the brand. A prediction, moreover, that's a bit more meaty than 'and Harry lived happily ever after', even though that's the most likely outcome.

To be honest, I've been dreading writing this chapter. The future is inherently unknowable and, let's be honest, marketers' achievements on the soothsaying front aren't exactly discussed in awed whispers when clairvoyants foregather. We're the Sibyll Trelawneys of multinational capitalism. We predicted that there's no demand for CNN. We anticipated that the jumbo jet would never get off the ground. We surmised that *Seinfeld*, *The Sopranos*, *Star Wars* and *Saturday Night Fever* would bomb big time. We worked out that the Palm PDA would flatline, that the Sony Walkman wouldn't catch on and that nobody's the slightest bit interested in the

Internet. We calculated that the total market for computers – the all-time, world-wide, optimistic-scenario market for computers – was five. Yes, five. We were convinced that B&H's seminal cigarette advertising would tank. We proved that Heineken's peerless 'refreshes the parts' slogan would confuse consumers and die an ignominious death.³ We had copious evidence that New Coke was tastier than the Old and therefore it was time to can the can. At one stage, moreover, we knew for a fact that 'ere long everyone would be driving Edsels, Sinclair C5s or Segways. Happy days.

Wheel Meet Again

With this ignoble record in mind, let me try to explain where the Harry Potter brand is heading. Two concepts are helpful in this regard: the Wheel of Rowling and the Potter Life Cycle.⁴ The former, in accordance with the familiar Wheel of Retailing theory, states that innovative ideas become ever more elaborate, unwieldy and bloated through time, until a point is reached where consumers can't be bothered and nimbler offerings take over. Most would agree that the Harry Potter series fits into this model. The first book clocked in at 223 pages, the second at 251 pages, the third at 317, the fourth 636 and the fifth a staggering 766. Indeed, the last two episodes were widely considered to be terribly self-indulgent, though this didn't stop them selling in large numbers. It remains to be seen whether the final stage of the model, disintegration and collapse, will come to pass. Much depends on the reaction to *Half-Blood Prince* and the movie of *Goblet*, which will necessitate major surgery on the story line.

The Potter Life Cycle, akin to the Product Life Cycle, posits a four-stage evolutionary trajectory: development, growth, maturity and decline. With an initial print run of 500 copies, the Potter series couldn't have had a more low-key start. Around about the time of *Azkaban*, the slowly developing series suddenly exploded and reached the rapid growth phase. The maturity stage transpired with *Goblet* and, even more so, *Phoenix*. This is where the parallel Potter Hype Cycle reached maximum volume (*Goblet*) and started to taper off (*Phoenix*). All being well, *Half-Blood Prince* will maintain the maturity stage, before the series starts to decline after the final volume appears in 2007, or thereabouts. That said, the HP brand is potentially immortal and marketers have all sorts of strategies for extending life cycles indefinitely, or so Ted Levitt tells us.⁵

The real world, unfortunately, doesn't always go to plan. There is evidence from Mattel and Lego that Potter is starting to lose his appeal. Sales of tie-in merchandise are softening. Sales of the *Phoenix* soft-cover also under-performed. This may be attributable to the three-year gap between *Goblet* and *Phoenix*, since it allowed Harry's core audience – those who were eleven when the series started – to outgrow the boy wonder. HP's real-world peers are now at college and, while innumerable adolescent enthusiasts have stepped into their shoes, the teenage mage's contemporaries have left him behind.⁶ No brand can afford to lose its most rabid fans and, as university students often put away their childish things, the future isn't all plain sailing for Potter. My empirical evidence suggests that boys are particularly prone to this propensity. It may be that the boy wizard's ability to conjure up boy readers is waning. This inevitably means that adults – instead of adolescents – comprise an ever-larger proportion of the books' total readership. Perhaps they should no longer be classified as kid-lit.

Potter Pressure

In this respect, it is impossible to overstate the commercial and aesthetic pressures on Joanne Rowling. The weight of customer expectation is stupendous. The loathing of the critics, who are hoping she'll fail to deliver a satisfying climax, is palpable. The profusion of fanfic, which Rowling is known to peruse (presumably to see if anyone has worked out the series' denouement), can only adversely affect her thought processes, as must the movie adaptations. Although JKR claims that her writing is unaffected by the movies, the conclusion of *Phoenix* is unquestionably influenced by cinematic scenarios. The effortless invention of the earlier books is also less in evidence and she sometimes seems to be straining for effect.⁷ Only the most self-confident writer, what's more, would not be harbouring doubts about the final twist, which may have seemed plausible when the series first came to her, but must surely be looking much shakier today. Especially when it's so obvious.

What, you don't know how it's going to end? Oh come on, guys, it's as blatant as can be. The clue's right there in the opening chapters of the first book. I'd tell you what it is, but I'm reluctant to spoil the fun for all the fanatics out there. Well, okay, maybe later...

In addition to the aesthetic pressures, with their evident commercial implications, there's another important matter. Logistics. There's an obvious disjunction between the books and the movies. The production lines are out of sync and they're not easily co-ordinated. On the one hand, customer interest has to be maintained. That means delaying the denouement for as long as possible. On the other hand, momentum must be sustained. That means keeping the HP product flowing. Clearly, if book seven is published too soon – before the movies 'catch up' as it were – customer interest may be insufficient to warrant the expense of mega-budget cinematic productions. The longer the delay, however, the more the core kiddie constituency grows out of its Potter fixation and looks to other entertainment alternatives.

This isn't a new problem, I grant you. We reflected previously on the supply-chain-imposed delay between books four and five. But if anything the headaches are even greater now than they were back in 2000. The movie of book four isn't due for release until December 2005. Rowling has written book six and it will be published in 2005 (on July 16, to be precise). The final book should follow in 2006, but as movie five will still be wending its way toward the multiplexes, expect to hear stories of writer's block, plot complications and Rowling's reluctance to kill off much-loved characters.

Regardless of the practicalities of the Potter production line, the worldwide market is so vast that scheduling is irrelevant. If the remaining books are published too quickly, the franchise might make a few million Galleons less than it otherwise would. But what's a couple of million when we're talking gazillions? No one associated with the HP brand will be going bust any time soon. Indeed, it is arguable that the potential of the brand is as yet largely untapped. Notwithstanding occasional lamentation about over-commercialisation, the surface has barely been scratched.

Consider the commercial potential of the characters-cum-concepts in the books. There are hundreds of them and the celebrity endorsement/brand development

possibilities are prodigious. Think Gillette (The Boy Who Shaved). Think Diageo (Death Eater Gin). Think Pepsico (Cleansweep Seven Up). Think Mars (Crookshanks Cordon Bleu Cat Food). Think Heinz (Bertie Botts Baby Food – A mouthful with every rusk). Think Unilever (Mountain Troll Toothpaste, Mouthwash, After Shave etc.). Think Bayer (Harry's Headache Assuager, bolt it down, acts like lightning). Think Eli Lilly (Got the Quidditch Itch? Ease your aching quidds with Qiddox). Think Fed-Ex (Time Turner Deliveries. Need it yesterday? Get it the day before yesterday). Think L'Oreal (Hagrid's Hair Care Range, specially formulated for knotty locks, tangled tresses and flubberworm infestation).

Another money-spinning possibility is the Hagrid Diet. It seems to have escaped everyone's notice, but the big friendly giant is described in book one as being five times as wide as ordinary mortals. By book five, he's down to twice the size of normal human beings. Clearly, the keeper of the keys has been on some kind of secret, low-cal regimen, a pretty effective one too, it seems. (Either that or the Care of Magical Creatures teacher's not taking proper care of himself.) However, as protein still plays a big part in Hagrid's daily intake – the cauldron cakes are demonstrably inedible – I can only assume it's some variant of the Atkins Diet. Atkins Xtra, perhaps. Jeez, his breath must be like the anal emanations of a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

Lookin' Good

Without doubt, the concept with the greatest marketing potential is the invisibility cloak. Warner Brothers should be ashamed of itself for failing fully to exploit this wonderful apparel opportunity. I mean, just think of all the ways you could sell invisible items of outerwear. They fit all sizes, look good on everyone, never suffer from stock-outs, cost nothing to manufacture, avoid accusations of exploiting third-world workforces, and can be produced in copious collections, cuts, fabrics, styles, looks, labels, lines and bespoke tailorings. There might be a bit of a problem with fakes, admittedly, but when the potential revenue from accessories is taken into account – invisible gloves, scarves, ties, belts, purses, brooches, underwear and so forth – a few cheap 'n' nasty knock offs is neither here nor there.

Then there's the books themselves. The title sponsorship possibilities are endless: *Harry Potter and the Burger King*; *Harry Potter and the Branson Pickle*; *Harry Potter and the Argos Catalogue*; *Harry Potter and the Fairy Liquid*; *Harry Potter and the Scottish Widows*; *Harry Potter and the Highland Spring*; *Harry Potter and the Fisherman's Friend*; *Harry Potter and the Amex Platinum*; *Harry Potter and the Paris Hilton*; *Harry Potter and the Max Factor*; *Harry Potter and the Kenco Chop-o-Matic*; *Harry Potter and the Ginsters Cornish Pastie*; *Harry Potter and the Starbucks Skinny Latte*; *Harry Potter and the Terry's Chocolate Orange*; *Harry Potter and the Tetley's Tea Bags*; *Harry Potter and the Land Rover Discovery*; *Harry Potter and the Tesco Clubcard Protocol*; *Harry Potter and the Dior Dress Code*; *Harry Potter and the Toshiba Laptop Plot*; *Harry Potter and the Ferrero Rocher Incident*; *Harry Potter and the Nike Air Imbroglia*; *Harry Potter and the Pot Noodle Conspiracy*; *Harry Potter and the Kleenex Puppy Explosion*; and, for sprightly senior citizens among the boy wizard's readership, *Harry Potter and the Stannah Stairlift Turbo*.

All sorts of special editions are there to be exploited, too. An edition in inflammable ink would go down a storm with the boondocks' book burners, would it not? Editions

in dragon skin, hippogriff hide, phoenix feather, house elf extract et cetera are certain to find a ready market. When the technology permits, a magical edition should also be considered. Just imagine: books that open themselves at the right page, fold their corners down unbidden, add erudite marginalia on a whim, purr gently when the reader's disbelief is suspended and whisper subtle sales pitches for spin-off merchandise – reading lights, comfy chairs, HP brand bookcases, de luxe unicorn horn editions of themselves.

That's only the start of it. The boy has to think big. A spectacular stage show is surely the first port of call: New Musical Hogwarts Express. On ice. A theme park, possibly with an accompanying shopping mall, must also be high on the agenda. Disney, it is rumoured, is currently in negotiation with Warner Brothers, so we can safely assume that animatronic Ford Anglias, knock-em-dead Knight Rides, Forbidden Forest Adventures, Quidditch Pitch Battles, Firebolt Roller Coasters and Shrieking Shack Thrills 'n' Spills are already on the Magic Kingdom drawing board. A Potter Plaza is sure to form part of this, though a stand-alone Hogsmeade Mall is not beyond the bounds of possibility (Table 8).

[Insert Table 8 about here]

Allegedly, M'Lud

Services represent yet another opportunity. These days, the real money isn't made by making stuff. It comes from selling services. As Sears (insurance), Dixons (extended warranties), IBM (management consultancy), Boeing (aircraft navigation systems), GE (financial solutions for business) and suchlike convincingly demonstrate, the service providing side of the corporate operation is infinitely more profitable than the merchandise moving side. An obvious possibility for the Potter brand lies in legal services. Since an injunction from the HP copyright holder is a sure-fire guarantee of unlimited free publicity, this writ-issuing service should be made available to ambitious authors, website warriors and publishers' PR departments. For a small fee, Warners will provide a sternly-worded cease-and-desist letter. For a bigger fee, Christopher Little will vow to pursue the malefactor to the ends of the earth. For an humungous fee, J.K. Rowling herself will confess to being 'shocked, outraged and dismayed' by the usurper's unforgivable actions. Michael Gerber has them on retainer, I gather.

I'm joking of course. Universally-admired organisations like Warner Brothers or Christopher Little wouldn't dream of indulging in such unscrupulous activities or acting in a socially irresponsible manner, nor would Joanne Rowling. Accordingly, educational services may be a better bet. As this book has shown, the Harry Potter phenomenon contains lessons for all marketing managers, brand-builders and would-be impresarios of the Entertainment Economy. It follows that formal educational opportunities needs must be made available. Hogwarts, ere long, will open a business school. Its motto will be modified to *Ratiocinator Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus* (Never Tickle a Sleeping Accountant). An MBBBA – Masticator of Bertie Botts Beans Assortment – will soon be recruiting. Mundungus Fletcher modules in ducking and diving will form part of the core curriculum. Why waste your time at Harvard when Hogwarts is happy to oblige?

Be that as it may, B-schools shouldn't be counting their chickens, let alone their grindylows. There's no guarantee that events will unfold as indicated. They might unravel instead. Nothing can be taken for granted in business life, or life full stop. The history of business reveals that heroes become zeroes in the blink of a bowtruckle. Who'd have thought that Marks & Spencer, or Sainsbury's, could lose its grip on the British retailing scene? Remember when Microsoft was unassailable, Boeing bestrode the aircraft business and Burberry was a brand that didn't say Chav? Is it really only a couple of years since Coke was it, Ronald McDonald was franchising's poster boy and Enron represented the future of the information economy?

The Tripping Point

For every tipping point, that wonderful moment when a brand, product or service takes off, there is a tripping point, the calamitous moment when it hits the skids.⁸ The tripping point is the opposite of the tipping point, a grotesque mirror image where good goes bad, where the mighty fall, where to-die-for becomes wouldn't-be-seen-dead-in. It is the moment when the stock market plunges precipitously, when Andersen and their ilk are exposed, when way-cool brands – Barbie, Sony, Lexus, FCUK, Tommy Hilfiger, Ian Schrager hotels – lose the way and indeed their cool. In certain respects, the tripping point is analogous to what Intel's Andy Grove calls 'strategic inflection', what retail real estate analysts know as 'saturation', and what the entertainment industry terms 'jumping the shark' (named after a disastrous sitcom occurrence in the dog days of *Happy Days*). But terminology and etymology are less important than existence, the fact that individual brands, organizations, product categories and entire industries are subject to the tripping point effect.

Harry Potter isn't immune. Casual observers may conclude that HP can't possibly fail. The two final volumes will sell in their multi-millions. The impending logistical snags will be ironed out. The movies will flow smoothly and earn megabucks at the multiplexes, as well as via DVDs, soundtracks, licensing fees and suchlike. The tie-in merchandise will find good homes. Fluffy action figures are not just for Christmas. Before long, every household in the world will own a Troll Snot glue dispenser or a vibrating Nimbus or, as intimated above, a tube of Scabbers Psoriasis Salve.

This is the most likely outcome. If there's one sure thing in marketing, surely it's the continued success of Harry Potter. As a marketer, and long-time fan of the brand wizard, I hope that's the way it works out. Things can go awry, however. The forthcoming *Goblet* movie, for example, is crucial inasmuch as it can't possibly mimic the book. Whereas the previous movies were pretty true to the stories – good for fans, not so good for cineastes – *Goblet* has to be cut down to size. These cuts may not meet with the approval of Potter's opinionated fan base. When the brand community's on your side, it's absolutely fantastic, because they buzz the brand for free. When they turn against you, it's an entirely different matter. Brandfans giveth and they taketh away.

Something similar could happen with the books. If, say, Book VI were to include transparently toyetic characters – written with the movie/merchandising in mind – a

strong negative reaction is quite feasible. Memories of Jar-Jar Binks are still fresh for *Star Wars* fans (the tripping point, surely, of Lucas's sci-fi saga, though Ewoks came close) and if Rowling were to introduce something similar, cries of 'sell-out' would soon follow.⁹ Consumers have a stake in Harry Potter too, a stake that is emotional rather than financial, but no less important for all that. More important, if anything, because the brand's financial performance is ultimately predicated on consumers' emotional attachment to the bedazzling boy wonder.

Alternatively, J.K. Rowling could misread her audience. The Potter books contain elements of social satire and/or commentary. The Dolores Umbridge debacle, the SPEW subplot, the Quidditch World Cup, which conveniently coincided with the Sydney Olympics and European Football Championships, are just some of the author's many attempts to engage with wider social-cultural concerns. If, however, she were to write a highly critical account of conditions in Azkaban prison or the unjustified invasion of a defenceless nation – events that have real world parallels in Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and Iraq – then the patriots in America's heartland could turn against Harry as promptly as they embraced him previously. As far as the Potter brand is concerned, North America is Dudley Dursley in a dinghy and US dinghies are notoriously unstable. Just ask Benetton.¹⁰

O Tempera, O more, more, mores

The foregoing is extremely unlikely, I must confess. Rowling has ready access to advisors, publicists and readership-savvy factotums, who presumably whisper early warnings in her delicate shell-likes. Just as Ancient Roman Emperors employed minions to remind them 'you are but mortal', no doubt the Joanne Rowling Empire is similarly equipped. On occasion, nevertheless, crises appear unannounced. They involve issues that even the best-prepared organisations aren't prepared for. It never fails to amaze me, for example, that no one has made the obvious connection between teenage obesity and the Harry Potter novels. The western world is beset by an epidemic of adolescent (and adult) obesity. This epidemic coincided with the worldwide ascent of the Harry Potter books. Books, incidentally, which contain detailed descriptions of delicious four- or five-course meals, often with extra helpings, to say nothing of sizeable snacks between meals. Hogwarts cuisine, moreover, is unfailingly high-fat, high-salt, high-calorie and high in just about everything that's guaranteed to pile on the pounds. Impressionable youngsters (and not so youngsters) are reading these books; their appetites are whetted by Rowling's peerless prose; their taste-buds are going crazy; the refrigerator is calling out to them; they succumb; they scoff a packet of Chocolate Frogs; they read another chapter of Harry Potter; and so the sorry cycle repeats itself.

Governments the world over are banning television ads for sugary snacks and junk food generally. They are overlooking the main culprit. I rest my case.

And then there's the drinking. Our great nation is in the grip of a binge drinking pandemic, among teenagers and young adults especially. Once again, the boy wizard is to blame. Granted, the books' characters spend much of their time quaffing pumpkin juice – fermented pumpkin juice – but they don't half knock back the butterbeers. Ogden's Old Firewhisky is a popular tippie as well. Rubeus Hagrid's classroom difficulties have nothing to do with his incomprehensible accent or

inadequate teacher training, they're entirely due to the hooch he consumes day and daily. He's sozzled so often in *Goblet* that he feeds Ogden's to the Beauxbaton horses. The man's a menace, a bad influence on the youth of today.

Something must be done. Far from being innocent adolescent pleasures, the Harry Potter books rank among society's most urgent concerns. They are mis-titled, moreover. Like Lord Voldemort, they should be called by their proper names: Harry Potter and the Stoned Philosopher; Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secret Herbs and Spices; Harry Potter and the Pizza of Azkaban; Harry Potter and the Goblet of Firewater; Harry Potter and the Order of the French Fries; Harry Potter and the Half-cut Prince; Harry Potter and the...Last Supper?

Rowling Barthes

A final unfortunate event that could prematurely derail the Hogwarts Express is a leak about the ending. If J.K. Rowling's much-anticipated denouement were to be exposed, the dramatic tension would rapidly evaporate, the jig would be up, the surprise would be spoiled. True, people would still read the books, mainly to see how events actually pan out and discover who, exactly, gets the chop and who doesn't. But because everyone already knows how it ends, half the fun is gone.

So, do you want to know what happens? Do you really, *really* want to know? If you could look in the Mirror of Erised, would you wish to see the final twist? Look no further, friends, all is about to be revealed...

(see <http://www.sfxbrown.com/denouement.pdf>)

References

1. Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad* (London: Corgi, 1992, pp. 8-9).
2. Emma Jones, *The Literary Companion* (London: Robson, 2004).
3. Stephen Brown, *Free Gift Inside!!* (Oxford: Capstone, 2003).
4. For a detailed discussion of marketing cycles etc, see Stephen Brown, *Postmodern Marketing* (London: Routledge, 1995).
5. Theodore Levitt, 'Exploit the Product Life Cycle' in *Levitt on Marketing* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1992, pp. 23-36).
6. I'm not suggesting the guy's remedial, let alone has learning difficulties. However, just as actors sometimes feel the need to escape the celebrity circuit and go back to college (Jody Foster, Natalie Portman et al), so too wannabe wizards have to be held back for the good of the brand.
7. 'God rest ye merry hippogriffs'. I ask you...
8. Stephen Brown, 'The Tripping Point', *Marketing Research*, in press.
9. Stephen Brown, Robert V. Kozinets and John F. Sherry, Jr., 'Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Art of Brand Revival', *Journal of Marketing*, 67 (July), pp. 19-33.
10. I'm thinking of the disastrous 'Death Row' campaign, in particular.

**Table 8: The Shopping Mall That Must Not Be Named
(Likely Tenant Mix)**

Housefurnishings:

Pottery Barn
Erised Mirror Workshop
Crouch's Couches
Dobbytat
Hobbitat (what's that doing here?)

Apparel:

Worm Tailoring (get outta here!)
Madame Maxine's Outsize Outfitters
Hext
Crookshanks Shoes
Bagman's Hold-alls
T.K. Maxine

Speciality goods:

Hermione's Secret
Abercrombie & Filch
Quirrell's Quills
Shrieking Radio Shack
Burns & Nobbles

Convenience goods:

Bertie Botts Grotto
Martin Miggs Magazines
Ollivanders Provender
Beauxbatons Bread & Pastries
Nearly Legless Nick's Liquor Store

Sports, Pets, etc:

Floo Locker
Seekers Sneakers
Fawkes Fireworks
Skeeters Beetles
Humphrey's Boggarts
St Brutus Sports Centre & Fitness Suite

Food Court:

Dunkin Dursleys
The Leaky McBurger
Bludger King
Pomfrey's Pomme Frites
Happy Death Eater
Little Chav
Snapelle Soft Drinks

Services:

Umbridge Orthodontics
Weasleys Weezing Wizards
Hagrid's Hair Care
Volde Mortgages
Portkey Cutting

Department Stores:

Muggle Mart
Dementors Depot
You-know-who Haus
