

Fantastically 'Heteronormal'

How the Potter franchise enforces heteronormativity amongst its young readership and how we can change it

Anne Engels

With the opening of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* in cinemas last month, the Harry Potter franchise has grown once again by another clever strike of Warner Bros. and co. Unlike previous spin-offs, such as the *Pottermore* website or the recently released play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child Parts 1 and 2*, this film takes place outside the familiar Potter universe. It takes its audience out of the familiar British boarding school environment and into the wider world of magic. It breaks with the nuclear universe where magic was concentrated in scenes in and around Hogwarts, and transplants it into 1920s New York. It moves away from a British environment and the Harry Potter-focused narrative, following the character of Newt Scamander, author of the magical schoolbook *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*.

The screenwriters have created an entirely new five-part story based on and surrounding Scamander's adventures. The question arises whether five parts may not be too excessive. Surely, the demand for more Potter-related content is imminent and Warner Bros. has certainly made a great effort to keep Harry Potter interesting ever since the release of the first movie back in 2000. With products such as the Harry Potter Studio Tour, the Harry Potter Theme Park, the Harry Potter exhibition and many smaller fan articles such as jewellery and clothing, Warner Bros. actively feeds the consumerist demand.

Change without Change

This excessive production of arguably unnecessary consumerist material is certainly subject to a lot of

criticism. However, what I am more interested in is how this material continues to promote an extremely gender-biased view. Let us reflect on this: on a very basic level the Harry Potter series is a coming-of-age story focusing on the psychological and physical development of a heterosexual teenage-boy wizard. And now, we have *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*: five more films that will (presumably) focus on a male heterosexual protagonist. The conscious decision of Warner Bros. and co. not to make this film about, for example, Harry's daughter or Luna Lovegood is evidence enough that Warner Bros. is reproducing the outdated heteronormative male-female binary.

If you look up heteronormativity in the dictionary, you will find the following explanation: 'denoting or relating to a world-view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual'. As this is the most commonly known and used definition of the word, I will be using it in this context. And I would like to argue that a powerful and globally reaching franchise like that of Harry Potter should be used to encourage sexual and gendered diversity, not to promote a heteronormative stereotype.

Yes, Rowling has outed Dumbledore as gay, but it has never been explicitly stated in any of the novels. Yes, Hermione is the symbol of a strong and intelligent young girl. However, nowhere in the story does she try to break with heteronormative rules of conduct.

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The Problem with Strong Female Characters

Personally, I find it quite ironic: while doing my research for this article, I have come across many essays dealing with the importance of Hermione Granger as a strong female character.¹ Some essays also quote Ginny Weasley, Cho Chang or Fleur Delacour.² None of them pay attention to Luna Lovegood. But Luna is, in my opinion, the queerest character in the entire series. By queer, I mean two things. First, I understand it as a synonym (even if somehow obsolete) of 'strange', 'alien' or 'other'. Second, I understand it in a form that has in recent years been thoroughly discussed in gender studies. Here, the word refers to any form of gender or sexuality that does not fit into the binary male-female agenda. In other more simplified terms, queer stands in direct opposition to the heteronormative.³

So, if we want to liberate the Harry Potter novels & films from a heteronormative discourse, it is necessary to promote Luna's character as another – maybe even more meaningful – role model for girls. It is essential to oppose her to the traditional strong heteronormal characters of Ginny and co. in order to introduce a sense of queerness into the educational and formative value. While Hermione Granger is often simultaneously praised and criticised for her academic achievements and her engagement for the liberation of the houseelves⁴; feminist critics tend to demonise characters such as Ginny and Cho for their relatively stereotypical femininity.⁵

In contrast, Luna Lovegood's character offers an alternative understanding of the female and femininity. Most often described as 'dotty'⁶ by her fellow students, she is the *one* character who thinks outside

the box. She asserts her unique position within the narrative by constantly proving and defending her – for want of a better word – queerness. Her beliefs may not conform to the generally accepted 'norm' of the magical world: She is most often criticised for believing in the existence of imaginary objects and creatures. However, her persistence in believing in her own abilities finally proves her right. So, for example, in the *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* movie, she rescues the unconscious Harry from the Hogwarts Express by using special spectacles (spectrespecs) that can detect wrackspurts floating around Harry's ears.⁷ It may be interesting to note that this scene takes place in the movie but not in the book. It is simultaneously an attempt to give a queer character a more dominant role but it is also an opportunity for the filmmakers to highlight Luna's otherness. Although she rescues Harry, her attire makes her look ridiculous and hence undermines her heroic act. Similar events also take place in the books. I will illustrate one of them later on.

Queering the Heteronormal through Fashion

It is not only her unique way of thinking that makes Luna stand out. It is also, as we have seen from the previous example, her sense of fashion. Her queer thinking is mirrored in the way she dresses. She is especially renowned for wearing extravagant pieces of jewellery, such as earrings that look like radishes⁸ or her butterbeer cap necklace⁹. Most striking though, is the episode in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* film where she accompanies Harry to Professor Slughorn's Christmas party wearing a dress that looks exactly like a Christmas tree.¹⁰ She is not afraid of cross-dressing. Her carefree attitude enables her to look beyond the conventional rules of fash-

Luna Lovegood's character offers a different depiction of the female and femininity.

It's a kind of magic. (CC BY-SA 2.0 by Wiennat Mongkulmann via flickr)



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ion. Unfortunately, fellow students commonly ridicule her for this exact reason. The act of ridiculing can be understood as an extended comment of JK Rowling herself and highlights her unease towards breaking the gender binary.

Similarly, in the books *Order of the Phoenix* and *Half-Blood Prince* as well as in the movie interpretation of the latter, Luna wears a wig that looks like a lion's head. She hereby expresses her support for the Gryffindor house Quidditch team (a sports game popular with wizards). Her subversion is in this case twofold: As a Ravenclaw, she belongs to a different college and yet assimilates with a potentially opponent team. But this subversion is not the most striking one. What is most noticeable, is the fact that she cross-dresses in order to highlight her support for the other team. If we look at, for example, a TV transmission of a football game, the camera regularly pans through the audience. Most often, it pauses on those supporters who are dressed most flamboyantly (e.g. wearing onesies, extravagant hats, wigs, having painted faces). Without verbally expressing it, the mere sensationalist showcasing of those particular individuals is a comment on their queerness. It is a silent prejudgment urging the spectator to think: 'Look at this crazy person. Aren't they exaggerating it a bit? Would you ever walk around like this? Aren't they peculiar? They must be brave to dress like this!'

By consciously calling attention to those supporters, TV programmes reinforce heteronormative prejudices: Everyone who dresses anomalously, even in the context of a football match, is denounced as being queer.

The only socially 'acceptable' time (it seems) one can cross-dress without receiving weird looks and comments is during the carnival period. In a sense, Luna is celebrating carnival all year round. But carnival is itself the celebration of the fool and the foolish. Hence, by dressing up during carnival season, one does not subvert heteronormative conventions but reinforces them. Luna's carnivalistic depiction in both the *Harry Potter* books and movies is a sign that the author and production company are uncomfortable with queering the socio-political heteronormative stereotype.

Instead of taunting and marginalising Luna Lovegood's character, it is about time to see how someone like her could help to educate the young Harry Potter readership on themes such as cross-dressing, queering gender norms and possibly even transvestism. Unfortunately the Potter industry has decided to push characters such as Luna to the back of the queue and focuses instead on the heteronormative male protagonist. With only one of the five *Fantastic Beast* films released so far, one can only hope that the next four will take a more emancipatory approach towards the diversification of the depiction of gender and sexuality in the Potter universe. ♦



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1 Fry, Michele, Heroes and heroines: Myth and gender roles in the Harry Potter books, *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* 7:1 2001, pp. 157-167.

2 Cherland, Meredith, 'Harry's Girls: *Harry Potter* and the Discourse of Gender' in: *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52:4 December 2008 pp. 273-282.

3 But even this argument has been under great attack. For a more nuanced reading of the term queer and its attached meaning(s), I recommend Annamarie Jagose's essay 'Feminism's Queer Theory' Jagose, Annamarie, 'Feminism's Queer Theory' in: *Feminism & Psychology* 19:15 2009, pp. 157-174.

4 Kellner, Rivka Temina, 'J.K. Rowling's Ambivalence Towards Feminism: House Elves — Women in Disguise — in the "Harry Potter" Books' in *The Midwest Quarterly* 51:4 Summer 2010, pp.367-385.

5 Cherland.

6 Rowling, J.K., *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scholastic Press, 2003), p. 285.

7 Yates, David (dir.), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* United Kingdom: Warner Bros., 2009.

8 *Phoenix*, p. 261.

9 *Phoenix*, p. 185.

10 *Half-Blood Prince*.