

Harry Potter, holy writ

## People read J. K. Rowling's books as if they were scripture. What if they were?

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [October 25, 2016](#) issue



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A few years ago I wrote here about my student Vanessa Zoltan and her experiment with reading *Jane Eyre* as if it were a sacred text. She read and reread each chapter, prayed its prayers, wrestled with its difficulties. She often felt transformed by her reading, for once she began to treat *Jane Eyre* as sacred, she found herself approaching other parts of her life—relationships, conversations, encounters with strangers—as if they were also sacred.

There were times when she felt betrayed by the novel, as when the full horror of the imprisonment and death of the West Indian “madwoman in the attic,” Bertha Rochester, impressed itself on her through repeated reading. Loving Jane as she did, Vanessa was surprised to find the sacred heart of the novel in Bertha, a character who upended Vanessa’s expectations about her project, a character who made her

feel not only challenged, but also read and interpreted. A sacred text, Vanessa learned, is not a perfect text, free from contradictions and outrages. A sacred text is a generative text, one that keeps reading and changing us.

Sacred texts also become sacred in community, and so Vanessa gathered a small group of *Jane Eyre* lovers and invited them into her practice, teaching them what she had learned. Fellow M.Div. student Casper ter Kuile joined in. Wouldn't it be fun, he teased, to try this with a book that people actually read?

He had a book in mind. They invited the public to a once-a-week gathering at the Humanist campus ministry, where Vanessa serves as a chaplain, to read J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* as if it were a sacred text. What they mean is that the book is sufficiently complex to generate multiple interpretations. They aimed to approach it with faith that the text had blessings to bestow, engage it through serious discussion, meditation, writing, and prayer, and contemplate it together in community. More than 60 people showed up.

The reading group continues today with leaders who learned the practice as participants in the first group. Vanessa and Casper continue to widen the reading circle. They host a podcast that sits at the top of the religion-and-spirituality podcast charts. *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* has already been downloaded more than a million times, and they have only made it through the first book in the *Harry Potter* series.

What is so compelling for so many people? The podcast format is simple: Vanessa and Casper compete (hilariously) to see who can give the best recap of a chapter in 30 seconds; they discuss the chapter in light of a theme, like friendship or vulnerability or love; they pick a passage and use a religious practice like *lectio divina* or *havruta* to explore it; and then they offer a blessing to one of the characters. Behind the scenes, producer Ariana Nedelman prods, encourages, and gently scolds, shaping the conversations into a half-hour podcast that, as one listener said, is marked by hope: hope that we can meet to share our most urgent questions and discover new answers together.

The podcast listeners keep the conversation going via social media and voicemail messages, some of which are played on the air. Some are from the "religious nones" to whom Vanessa and Casper feel a special vocation. Others are from institutionally affiliated religious listeners, many of them Christians.

But listeners are more likely to sort themselves into the Hogwarts houses than into religious identities. They understand themselves to be part of one conversation, bound together through their reading. Some of their interpretations are explicitly theological, others not. Some reinforce Vanessa's or Casper's readings, and some resist them—not everyone thinks it's a good idea to bless the Dursleys—and when they talked about white privilege in the context of Harry's invisibility cloak, some listeners thought they dwelt too long on white pain. But all of the listeners are enlivened by the opportunity to think with books they love, and about what it means to be awake and alive in the world.

Casper often says that his vocation is to help millennials have confidence in the spiritual practices they are already doing and to help them find ways to deepen those practices in community. *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* has opened a space for readers to encounter each other, read together, and learn from each other by engaging religious reading practices together. In this community, words like *sacred* and *blessing* belong to everyone. Some take up this language eagerly; others handle it more tentatively, wondering if there is anything meaningful in those old words for them.

This is not a traditionally religious space, but it is not a religionless space either. It's a place to find out what happens when we approach something we love as sacred, a place to experiment in community with blessing and being blessed. For those of us in religious communities, it's a reminder that reading a sacred text together can be a joyful, inviting experience.

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