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 **Bubble-Wrapped Children and Safe Books for Boys: The
Politics of Parenting in *Harry Potter***

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Children's Literature

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 39, 2011

pp. 213-233

10.1353/chl.2011.0016

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

Abstract

Harry Potter performs the same cultural work as contemporary popular discourse on parenting by suggesting that children can be set free to have adventures without risking death, since the young people who die in the series are never killed in accidents but only as a result of fighting evil.

Bubble-Wrapped Children and Safe Books for Boys: The Politics of Parenting in Harry Potter

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The decade of *Harry Potter's* publication, 1997–2007, was also the decade of an explosion of British and North American books and media articles, addressed to a popular audience, denouncing both parental neglect and parental overprotectiveness. The books include Frank Furedi's *Culture of Fear Revisited* (1997) and *Paranoid Parenting* (2001); Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* (2005); Silken Laumann's *Child's Play* (2006); and Michael Ungar's *Too Safe for Their Own Good* (2007). At the same time, the media popularized the terms "helicopter parenting," "free-range parenting," and "bubble-wrapped children."¹ For its many adult readers, the Harry Potter series may be read as a fictional text performing a cultural work similar to that of these works of nonfiction that capitalize on parental anxiety about risk and the lack of it.² Although, unlike them, the series claims that responsible parenthood includes accepting the death of children, nevertheless, like them it perpetuates the wish-fulfillment fantasy that allowing children greater freedom (a freedom constructed largely through nostalgia) can be achieved without the sacrifice of incurring debilitating injury and death.

For although young people do die at Hogwarts, and their parents mourn them, they only die in the service of a struggle against evil, not as the result of a bid for freedom, fun, or the pleasure of risk taking for its own sake. They are lost to murder, not accident. In reality, however, accidents are much more of a threat to children of Harry Potter's age and nationality than is murder: for example, British government statistics for 2006 cite 585 deaths in England and Wales from accidents for ages ten to nineteen, versus twenty-nine from assault in the same age group (Office for National Statistics 202, 224). The series, unlike the contemporary cultural discourse around parenting, asks its readers to accept the necessity of sacrifice, but presents them with a sacrifice they are unlikely to be called upon to make. Thus the culture, agitated by contradictory and willfully blind critiques of parental protectiveness, soothes itself with the displaced truth-telling of J. K. Rowling's best-selling story.



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