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## The Boy Who Lived: From Carroll's Alice and Barrie's Peter Pan to Rowling's Harry Potter

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Children's Literature

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 32, 2004

pp. 178-202

10.1353/chl.2004.0005

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

*Children's Literature* 32 (2004) 178-202

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[Access article in PDF]

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# Potter

## Amy Billone

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Who is today's most beloved child character? In the midst of J. K. Rowling's triumphs on the literary market, we would have difficulty giving any answer other than Harry Potter. Rowling's fifth novel in the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, broke records with its first print run of 6.8 million copies and a second print run of 1.7 million copies. Rowling has become an international celebrity; she is now the richest woman in England, wealthier than the Queen herself, and she has even been named an Officer of the British Empire. However, five years before the publication of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, James Kincaid boldly declared that "no children have ever been more desirable" than Lewis Carroll's Alice and J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan (275).

In this essay I will argue that Harry Potter competes with Alice and Peter Pan by combining both of them inside himself. He experiences Peter's ecstasy when he gracefully flies, Peter's superhuman aptness when he battles deadly foes, and Peter's effortless capacity to make dreams come alive. At the same time, like Alice, Harry struggles to understand the difference between what appears to be true and what is true. In Book 1, he must work his way along a chessboard by playing with and against violently destructive chess pieces; by the end of Book 5 he has suffered betrayal by nearly everyone he knows.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as Harry matures, he becomes angrier and angrier at the chaos surrounding him. In the fourth and fifth books, he longs to leave Hogwarts forever. Just as Alice, who is about to be decapitated by the Queen of Hearts, finally shouts out, "'Who cares for you? . . . You're nothing but a pack of cards!'" (97), Harry discovers that his dreams have deceived him—consequently, he has led all of his friends to their probable deaths and allowed his godfather to be murdered.

For Alice and Harry, the knowledge that dreams and reality do not coincide accompanies their growth out of childhood. In Alice's case, childhood may have evaporated before her discovery of Wonderland (when she is only seven years old); the lovely Edenic garden that she [End Page 178] glimpses after she tumbles down the rabbit hole turns out to be an illusion. Her resulting rage, which augments throughout the book, causes her physically to grow out of her nightmare. Harry Potter experiences a similar kind of fury throughout Book 5 (when he is nearly sixteen years old); this anger interferes with the truthfulness of his dreamscape and finally forces him to realize the discrepancy between fantasy and reality. In the first parts of this paper I will investigate why Peter Pan's gender allows him to remain in Neverland (to control it, in fact) while Alice's gender causes her fantasy universe to distort into a nightmarish mirror reflection. If we take Kincaid's words seriously (and I do), that as of 1992 no two children had ever been more desirable to us than Alice and Peter Pan, we must arrive at the conclusion that until very recently childhood has been an unsettlingly masculine space.

By comparing Harry Potter to Alice and Peter Pan, I want to question whether now, in the twenty-first century, we have expanded our conception of childhood so that girls participate as comfortably in fantasylands as boys do. In particular, I am interested in the notion of the dreamchild. While many people (including J. K. Rowling herself) may prefer Hermione to Harry, it is Harry and not Hermione who experiences an intense and increasingly unstable relationship with dreams and nightmares. Hermione surprisingly seems to have no dreams at all.

As I will demonstrate in this paper, gender may *still* prohibit girls from traveling to childhood dreamscapes, where fantasy and...

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