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Harry Potter And The Well Of Medical Research

World of Hogwarts Frequently Mined For Studies

July 08, 2011 | By WILLIAM WEIR, bweir@courant.com, The Hartford Courant

Who knew the world of Harry Potter was such a rich source of material for medical researchers?

For more than a decade, the phenomenally popular series has provided grist for studies on topics ranging from genetics to social cognition to autism.

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PubMed, an online database of medical studies, lists 30 studies that invoke the young wizard — "Harry Potter and the Recessive Allele," "Harry Potter and the Structural Biologist's (Key)stone," even "Harry Potter Casts a Spell on Accident-Prone Children."

That last study found that children's emergency department visits decreased significantly when new Harry Potter books went on sale. Conversely, a 2003 study in the New England Journal of Medicine found that the lengthy books actually caused an ailment dubbed "Hogwarts headache" among young readers who spent too much time reading them.

A few research topics are grounded entirely within J.K. Rowling's fictional world. That's the case with Connecticut's own contribution to the expansive body of Potter-related medical research. The New England Center for Headache in Stamford, with the help of a Monroe high school student, published a study in 2007 examining the causes of Harry's headaches in *Headache: The Journal of Head and Face Pain*.

More commonly, though, the studies focus on the real world and use the series as a research tool. Martha Driessnack, an assistant professor at the college of nursing at the University of Iowa, published a study on how the books can help explain complex ideas about genetics in the *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*. Driessnack, who counts the character Madame Pomfrey (a nurse) as a role model, saw relations between the wizards and muggles ("non-wizards" to the Potter-illiterate) as a good teaching tool.

For instance, children might wonder why they have traits different from their parents, or why a sibling has a hereditary disease when there's no apparent history of it in the family. The character of Hermione illustrates the idea of recessive genes very clearly, Driessnack said. "Both her parents were muggles, but the stories show how you could have two muggles who — surprise! — make a wizard," she said.

Why does the caretaker Argus Filch have no magical power when both his parents do? Driessnack said this may be a case of incomplete penetrance of a gene. "Or," she acknowledged, "there might have been some fishy business in his past, and his father wasn't really his father."

Proving the all-ages appeal of the Harry Potter series, many of the researchers count themselves as fans. Shira Gabriel, who teaches psychology at the University of Buffalo, said she and her friends are re-watching all of the Potter movies in preparation for the final installment, which opens next week. She used the books to explore how closely people identify with fictional narratives for a study in the May issue of *Psychological Science*.



"Studies have shown that narratives are something that people turn to when they're lonely," she said. In a survey of independent literature, Harry Potter came up more than anything else in our population, which was college-age students. It was a really obvious choice to use it, because it plays such a big role in our students' lives."

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Studying the neural bases of self-perception in children, Jennifer Pfeifer, professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, said her research team needed someone children knew well. And because it was a six-year study, published in the Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience in 2007, they needed someone whose popularity would last over that period.

"We needed a suitable person about whom children would know a lot," she said. "And we were really convinced that most children would have as much familiarity with Harry Potter as adults would with a president."

Hallie Thomas, the then-high school student from Connecticut who co-wrote the paper on Harry's headaches, said she is still as Potter-crazed as she was when the study was published.

"I'm actually watching the live stream of the London premiere," she said Thursday.

She worked on it with the headache center's director, Dr. Fred Sheftell, who died earlier this year, and Timothy J. Steiner at Imperial College of London. The study diagnosed Harry Potter's headaches as migraines — though the researchers couldn't explain why the appearance of Harry's arch nemesis Voldemort would trigger them.

Thomas, 21, graduated from Fairfield University in May with a double major in mathematics and art history. She plans to go to London in the fall to study European art history. She's also considering writing a paper that further explores Harry's medical condition.

Colman Noctor, a psychotherapist in Ireland, published a study in 2006 on how the series' use of metaphor and symbolism can be incorporated into psychotherapy with children. He said the wide range of themes in the Harry Potter series make it a natural for his work.

"The books deal with racism, anger, feeling different, love, hate, loss and lots more," he said in an e-mail. "As an adolescent psychotherapist, this is really useful stuff. My research looked at using the books to aid therapeutic engagement."

Noctor said he can understand why the Harry Potter books play so big in the field of medicine.

"Who wouldn't fantasize about using magic to overcome life's challenges?" he said. "Also, isn't it reassuring that wizards struggle, too?"

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