IS DUMBLEDORE GAY?
WHO'S TO SAY?

Tamar Szabó Gendler

On October 19, 2007, before a packed audience at Carnegie Hall in New York City, J. K. Rowling made a remarkable announcement. In response to a question about whether Albus Dumbledore had ever been in love, Rowling announced that she had “always thought of Dumbledore as gay.”

Reaction was immediate and emphatic. Within two days, close to 3,000 comments had been posted at the Leaky Cauldron message board, with another 2,500 at MuggleNet. There were articles in *Time* and *Newsweek*, reports on CNN and NBC, and even an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*.

Responses fell into three categories. Some readers were delighted by the news. As one Leaky Cauldron poster wrote, “You go Jo! Finally a strong, wise, non-stereotypical portrayal of a gay man!”¹ A second group was dismayed. “I am extremely disappointed at Jo for her comments on Dumbledore. It was not necessary for her to promote such a perverse lifestyle in connection to a series of books that millions of children will take interest in now and in the future,” wrote another.²
But the most interesting type of response was the third. These readers responded to the declaration by challenging Rowling’s authorial authority. “Unless she decides to write Book Eight, Ms. Rowling has missed her chance to impart any new information about any of the Harry Potter characters. If the series is truly at an end, then the author no longer possesses the authority to create new thoughts, feelings, and realities for those characters,” wrote one reader. “To insist on ownership (as she has done) and the right to define or re-define those characters as she sees fit after the fact, is to insist on an absolute control over the literary experience of her readers she cannot possibly have,” wrote another.

On its surface, this third response is perplexing. After all, at the Carnegie Hall interview, Rowling revealed all sorts of things that are not explicitly part of the Harry Potter stories. She told the audience about things that happened after the Potter books end, about things that happened before the books begin, and about things that happen during the books. But no one wrote in to comment that Neville Longbottom didn’t go on to marry Hannah Abbott or that Remus Lupin, prior to Dumbledore taking him in, didn’t lead “a really impoverished life because no one wanted to employ a werewolf” or that Petunia Dursley didn’t “almost wish Harry luck when she said good-bye to him” at the beginning of Deathly Hallows—all of which were things that Rowling revealed only in the course of the interview.

What we face here is a version of what philosophers call the problem of truth in fiction. Are there facts about what is true in the world of a story, and if so, what determines those facts? Is it simply a matter of the statements that are canonically expressed by the story’s author? What role is played by the story’s readers (or hearers) or by what the author was thinking? What about conventions governing the genre to which the story belongs? And so on.

Because we’re trying to determine whether a particular statement is true in a work of fiction, one obvious strategy would be to think about the problem in analogy with nonfiction. So let’s ask: how does a historian or a biographer go about determining whether a particular statement is true? Well, she looks at the way the actual world happens to be, using things such as archival documents and historical records and archaeological evidence. On this basis, she might determine that the statement “George Washington was president of the United States” is true. It’s true because (in the actual world) George Washington was president of the United States.

How would this go in the fictional case? Can we learn that “George Weasley was a Gryffindor Beater” is true (of the world of Harry Potter) by learning that (in the world of Harry Potter) George was a Gryffindor Beater? In the case of George Washington, we looked at the actual world. So, in the case of George Weasley, we simply have to look at the Harry Potter world. The problem is, we don’t really know which world that is. After all, presumably there is some other imaginary world—call it the world of Harry Schmotter—where George Weasley happens to be Seeker for Slytherin. And another—call it the world of Harry Plotter—where George happens to be Chaser for Hufflepuff. And what about the world of Harry Putter, where they play golf instead of Quidditch? Or the world of Harry Hotter, where they wear bathing suits instead of robes? The problem, as the philosopher David Lewis (1941–2001) pointed out, is that “every way that a world could possibly be is a way that some [imaginary] world is.”

So, it’s simply not useful to think of the task of the (fictional) storyteller as being like the task of the (real-world) historian or biographer. It’s pretty clear that the historian is engaged in an act of discovery, and it’s pretty clear what kinds of things she’s discovering. Only one world is the actual world, and the
hard part for the historian or the biographer is figuring out what happened in it. But there are as many imaginary worlds as there are imaginative possibilities, so the hard part for the fictional storyteller is deciding which imaginary world to tell us about. And it’s far from clear whether to call this an act of discovery or instead to call it an act of creation.⁷ To put the same point in a slightly different way, the problem with figuring out whether “George Weasley was a Gryffindor Beater” is true (of the world of Harry Potter) is the problem of figuring out which one of the infinitely many possible imaginary worlds is the world of Harry Potter. And that leaves us right where we started.

Let’s try to approach our problem from a slightly different direction. Let’s think about Harry Potter as an act of communication in which a writer, J. K. Rowling, is trying to give her readers access to a particular imaginary world that she envisions. She does this by writing certain words that she expects her readers to understand in certain ways. (Let’s assume for the time being that there are no difficulties involved in understanding the literal meanings of the sentences she has written.) By writing those words, she lets the readers know exactly which world she is envisioning—that is, she lets them know which world is the world of Harry Potter. And that leaves us right where we started.

Before we turn to (b), let’s return to the claim that the world of Harry Potter is supposed to be internally coherent. What sense of “supposed to be” are we talking about? Well, it seems pretty clear that for the most part, the world described in the Potter books is a coherent one—as evidenced by the fact that the inconsistencies are so rare. And Rowling’s readers expect her to be describing an internally coherent world—as evidenced by the fact that when there are inconsistencies, readers point them out as notable. It’s also obvious that Rowling intends to be describing a coherent world—as evidenced by the fact that she corrected these inconsistencies in later editions. Moreover, it seems apparent that the Harry Potter books are the kind of books in which internal consistency is prized; they belong to a genre (that is, a category of literary compositions characterized by certain conventions) where internal consistency is a hallmark.

about whether this is a reasonable requirement), then we can’t take everything that appears on those pages as true in the fiction. For there are trivial inconsistencies across the books. In Sorcerer’s Stone, for example, Percy Weasley’s prefect badge is described as silver, whereas in Order of the Phoenix, we are told that prefect badges are scarlet and gold; in Chamber of Secrets, we are told that Moaning Myrtle haunts the toilet’s S-bend, but in Goblet of Fire, she is said to haunt the toilet’s U-bend. If we require consistency, we’ll need to accept either the S-bend claim or the U-bend claim—but not both. (Which one should we choose? Presumably, the one that Rowling tells us she really meant. We’ll come back to this issue in a later section.) With this caveat in place, it seems reasonable to say that all of the things that are written down on those 4,100-plus pages are true in the world of Harry Potter. That is, it seems reasonable to say that the world of Harry Potter is one of the worlds in which the things written down on those 4,100-plus pages are true. Let’s call these things the world’s primary truths.

How does part (a) of this proposal fare? It certainly seems like a good beginning, but there’s one minor problem. If we require that the stories be consistent (we can talk in a minute
We'll come back to these four criteria—textual evidence, reader response, authorial intent, and genre constraints—in our discussion further on. But to get there, let's consider (b)—the suggestion that the only things that are true in the world of Harry Potter are the primary truths. In contrast to (a), (b) seems more problematic. For here are some things that are not primary truths in the world of Harry Potter: that Hermione Granger has ten fingers, that Lavender Brown is more than two feet tall, that Helga Hufflepuff was never governor of Missouri, and that Cedric Diggory does not play for the Boston Red Sox. After all, there's no sentence in any of the Potter books that reads: “Hermione had ten fingers” or “Cedric Diggory, though an excellent Quidditch player, was not a member of a major league baseball team.” And if it seems reasonable to think that these things are true in the world of Harry Potter, along with tons of others that are not explicitly stated in the text, then what makes them true? What principles govern the generation of what we might call secondary truths?

One major source of secondary fictional truths are non-fictional truths imported from the actual world. Presumably, most readers think that in the world of Harry Potter, the Earth revolves around the sun, cats have four legs, and January precedes February. Although these things aren't explicitly stated in the books, they are consistent with the story's primary truths, and they help fill out the imaginary world in a way that seems useful and natural. But is it true in the world of Harry Potter that Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492 or that John Lennon sang with the Beatles? Although these things are consistent with the story's primary truths, they don't seem necessary to help fill out the imaginary world. And what about things like Princess Diana and Prince Charles divorcing during Harry's years at Hogwarts or that during those years, iPods became popular? These are not outright inconsistent with the story's primary truths, but they seem somewhat in tension with the imaginary world. And how about the real-world facts about Harry Potter itself: that the movie version of Goblet of Fire was directed by Mike Newell or that Deathly Hallows sold more than 11 million copies in its first twenty-four hours? Nothing in the stories explicitly rules them out, but, surely, we don't want to say that these things are true in the world of Harry Potter.

These examples bring out the problem with accepting what we might call the maximal inclusiveness principle: that everything that is true in the actual world is true in the fictional world, unless it is explicitly contradicted by a primary fictional truth. For that principle would make it true in the world of Harry Potter that you are reading this chapter right now! Moreover, it's not clear that we even want such a precise principle. Do we really think there is a genuine fact of the matter whether it is true in the world of Harry Potter that Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz independently discovered (or invented) calculus? (Thanks, guys!) Would we really want to say that someone who denies that this is true in the world of Harry Potter is wrong or that he doesn't properly understand the story? And wouldn't a similar issue arise, whichever specific principle we chose?

As Aristotle famously said, “Our discussion will be adequate if its clarity fits its subject-matter . . . . The educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows . . . . It is just as mistaken to demand demonstrations from the rhetorician as it is to accept merely persuasive arguments from the mathematician.” So it looks like when we ask about a story's secondary truths, we should be asking for rules of thumb about what allows us to make best sense of—or to best appreciate—the work of fiction. And really, what else could there be? Unless we go back to a picture in which the task of a fiction writer is like that of an actual reporter whose job it is to tell us about a single fully specified imaginary world, it seems odd to require that there must be a definitive
fact of the matter about whether every single potential secondary truth is or is not part of the story world.

So, Is Dumbledore Gay?

Let's go back to our central question—is it true in the world of Harry Potter that Dumbledore is gay?—and think about what sorts of considerations we can bring to bear in answering that question. As we noted, there seem to be four places we can look: textual evidence, reader response, authorial intent, and genre constraints.

As far as textual evidence goes, it's clear that "Dumbledore is gay" is not a primary truth in Harry Potter: that sentence appears nowhere in the 4,100-plus canonical pages. So the question is whether it is a secondary truth. Clearly, it's not the sort of secondary truth that can be imported directly from the actual world, because Dumbledore is a fictional character. But is it the kind of implied secondary truth that astute readers can be expected to pick up on—for example, from the way Rowling describes Dumbledore's intense relationship with Gellert Grindelwald in Deathly Hallows ("You cannot imagine how his ideas . . . inflamed me"), and the fact that no heterosexual romantic interests of Dumbledore's are ever mentioned.9 Here it seems fair to say that while it is compatible with the story's primary truths (and perhaps even suggested by them—we'll come back to this at the end of this section), it is not strictly implied by them. And, indeed, this was the response of some of the books' most careful readers: when actress Emma Watson (who plays Hermione) was told that Dumbledore is gay, she responded, "It never really occurred to me before, but now [that] J. K. Rowling's said that he's gay, it sort of makes sense."10

Yet why should it matter what Rowling says? As readers have complained, "If the series is truly at an end, then the author no longer possesses the authority to create new thoughts, feelings, and realities for those characters. . . . To insist on ownership . . . after the fact, is to insist on an absolute control over the literary experience of her readers she cannot possibly have."11 And, indeed, this sort of view of authorial authority is held—in various forms—by leading critics of authorial intent, such as William K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida.12 They point out, for example, that language is a social creation and that authors do not have the power simply to make words mean what they choose. If a professor announces to her class that there will be a test on Thursday, then even if she intended to say "Tuesday," she can't simply claim that what her words meant was that there will be a test on Tuesday. (Of course, she can claim that she meant to say "Tuesday"—but she can't claim that in saying "Thursday," she said words that meant Tuesday.) Similarly, if an author has a character recite a piece of poetry that the author intends to be a work of great beauty and profundity but that consists of the words: "Hickory dickory dock; Kreacher took my sock," it doesn't follow that "Hickory dickory dock; Kreacher took my sock" is a great poem. By this reasoning, it's not up to Rowling to say whether Dumbledore is gay: her texts need to be allowed to speak for themselves, and each of their readers is a qualified listener.

One implication of this view is that there is no single "correct" meaning or interpretation of a given text. Different readers approach the text from different historical and cultural contexts, and their engagement with the text will almost certainly give rise to multiple interpretations. The Harry Potter books might mean one thing to me, another thing to you, and another thing to J. K. Rowling—with no one interpretation privileged over any of the others. According to this sort of view, the whole idea of trying to figure out what is going on in the world of Harry Potter is misguided: there isn't a single world that is the "world of Harry Potter"—there are as many Potter worlds as there are readers.13
By contrast, "intentionalist" literary theorists such as E. D. Hirsch Jr. argue that authorial intent is what fixes a text's correct interpretation. Without such a constraint, Hirsch contends, one uses the text "merely as grist for one's own mill." And, at least to the extent that readers' primary concern is with understanding what an author meant to communicate, intention is obviously central. If I ask you whether you love me, and you respond by reciting a poem, my primary interest will not be in trying to interpret the poem from my unique historico-cultural perspective: my primary interest will be in trying to understand what you intended to convey by reciting it. Likewise, if I'm trying to understand a garbled military order; interpreting what I believe to be a divinely authored text; trying, as a judge, to discover a legislature's "original intent"; or offering what I hope will be the definitive interpretation of Plato's Timaeus, my primary, if not exclusive, interest will be in reconstructing the relevant authorial intent. And this is also true for many readers of the Harry Potter books.

Why? Because for most Potter fans, Rowling is the patented owner and creator of the Potter universe. She's the master storyteller who has the right—indeed, the unique prerogative—to authoritatively fill out, embellish, and continue her story. Rowling herself seems to endorse this view, claiming that Dumbledore "is my character. He is what he is and I have the right to say what I say about him." And in informing us, extra-canonically, that Dumbledore is gay, Rowling is filling out for us, in a kind of oral appendix to the Potter books, details of the story that she wishes her readers to know. Readers are free, of course, to read the relevant texts differently—it is, as they say, a free country. But most Potter fans are primarily interested in how Rowling chooses to fill out her imagined world. And unless we have a specific reason to discount what she says in this case—as we might, for example, if we think she misspoke and said "Dumbledore" when she meant "Madame Hooch"—it's hard to see how we could consistently accept all of the other details and backstories that Rowling has revealed only in the context of her hundreds of interviews and postings.

**Closing Speculations: Genre**

Although, for many readers, Rowling's declaration settles the matter, it is nonetheless interesting to think about the question from the perspective of our final theme—that of genre. One way that a reader might argue against the suggestion that Dumbledore is gay would be to contend that Harry Potter belongs to a genre of children's stories in which issues of adult sexuality do not arise. According to this sort of account, it simply isn't faithful to the story to say that Dumbledore is gay—not because he's straight or even asexual, but because it doesn't make sense to speak about his sexuality at all.

But while this might be a plausible argument in the case of Goodnight Moon or The Wizard of Oz, it's hard to see how it could be maintained for Harry Potter, given that Rubeus Hagrid and Madame Maxime have a book-length flirtation, and that Severus Snape's hatred of Harry is partly explained by his unrequited love for Lily Potter. Indeed, one might even counter that facts about genre help the case that Dumbledore is gay. For the Harry Potter books do belong to a genre of young adult fiction in which adults' personal needs and desires are largely invisible to the youthful protagonists. And this would help explain why no mention of Dumbledore's sexuality is made in the text, despite it being an important fact about the larger imaginary world.

Alternatively, one might argue that Harry Potter belongs to a genre of imaginary stories in which the number of minority identities is limited. While it's true that Cho Chang is Chinese and the Patil sisters are Indian and Lee Jordan is black, it's also true that the decorations at the Yule Ball don't seem to include Hanukkah menorahs, and that we hear nothing about
Throughout the Harry Potter series, characters fall in true love. Hermione and Ron are decent and loyal; Tonks and Lupin are courageous and unlucky; Bill Weasley and Fleur Delacour are dashing and attractive. Dumbledore’s great power is his intellect. Could it be that Dumbledore is gay because Rowling could not conceive of there being a woman who was his intellectual equal?  

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 230.
7. Indeed, this breakdown between creation and discovery seems to be true for abstract objects in general. Think about what a composer does when she writes down a series of notes: Does she create a new piece of music, or does she specify one of the infinitely many already existing (but previously unnoted) sequences of sounds? Aren’t these basically two descriptions of the same thing?
13. For a general discussion of these issues, see Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), especially chapter 2.
CHOICES VS. ABILITIES
Dumbledore on Self-Understanding

Gregory Bassham

To “know thyself,” said Socrates, is the beginning of wisdom. Who am I? What are my deepest desires? What are my talents? How can I live most authentically? Does my life have a purpose? What goals should I pursue? From the beginning of Western philosophy, such questions have been at the heart of the quest for wisdom and perspective.

The search for self-understanding is a central theme of the Harry Potter books. At the beginning of _Sorcerer’s Stone_, Harry knows almost nothing about who he is or where he comes from. He thinks he is an ordinary, poor, unknown boy living in a humdrum and nonmysterious world. As the stories unfold, Harry realizes that none of these things are true, and he achieves a progressively deeper understanding of himself, his abilities, and his place in the world. In traditional philosophical language, the Potter books are a tale of personal enlightenment. They describe Harry’s long and difficult journey from “appearance” to “reality.”
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