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A Collection Enriched by Cultural Difference... and a Little Magic

Christina Pulles

Washington University in St Louis

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A Collection Enriched by Cultural Difference...and a Little Magic

“Why do you need to own the same book twice?” My sister wrinkles her nose as she hoists a large box of books—the largest box that I transport from Chicago to St. Louis every year—and carries it out to the car. I patiently explain to her that they’re not the same books, they’re different editions, and that I in fact own three or four copies of most of them.

I do not do this with all of my favorite books (although if I had the money, I probably would). No, I have reserved the special pleasure of acquiring different editions for a certain series that has been shaping my life since the seventh grade: J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books. I know that it is not unique to like *Harry Potter*; that everyone claims to be obsessed with the story of the boy wizard and his tumultuous teenage years; that probably every student at Washington University owns a copy of at least one of the books. However, my interest in the series has extended beyond the pages of the Mary Grand-Pré-illustrated Scholastic editions that the average fan possesses. I would contest that my appreciation outdoes that of many other fans. Have they read each of the novels endless times? Has their obsession expanded to include owning the British adult and children’s editions of each of the novels? Do they own a special shelf, homemade by their friends for their sixteenth birthday and plastered with pictures of them in *Harry Potter* gear, that holds these three sets of novels?

In Great Britain, Bloomsbury, the British and original publisher of *Harry Potter*, has always released a children’s edition and an adult edition, an action that lacks distinction in the words on the pages, but which allows for two very different covers and acknowledges the diversity and amplitude of Rowling’s reading public, as well as the sophistication present in the novels. Predictably, the British children’s editions are brightly colored, featuring drawings of Harry and company on their most perilous adventures, while the adult editions are black and

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usually portray images of objects, such as the Goblet of Fire or Regulus Black's locket. I find these differences in appearance fascinating—the adult editions suggest darkness, mystery, and a cool invocation of fear, while the children's editions evoke images of fun adventure, friendship, and magic. In addition, the divergence of the American editions, with their pastel-drawn covers, specially created fonts, and larger size says a lot about the different markets the books are catered to. It is these physical deviations that sparked my interest in the multiple editions, but this interest goes much deeper than physical features.

As an English and Spanish major and a Linguistics minor, my interest in languages is evident, and to anyone that knows me, it came as no surprise that I actually took the time to read the separate British editions of the books. The differences between the English vernacular Rowling employs and the American translation are subtle, although the title of the first book in the series varies depending on the edition. In Great Britain it is called *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, because the connotation of “philosopher” there is closer to magician than in the United States. Scholastic chose to change the title to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* because they feared American readers would be confused. However, Scholastic's confidence in the American public increases over the series, and the differences tend to disappear; the publishers finally realized that American fans would appreciate the distinctions. I took special pleasure when I noted the first difference in *Philosopher's Stone*: Rowling describes Dudley as being pictured on a “roundabout” instead of a carousel. The intense enjoyment and linguistic fascination I experienced affirmed my decision to collect the British editions, despite questions such as my sister's.

My obsession with the language of J.K. Rowling extends beyond her original English, however. The *Harry Potter* books have been translated into 67 languages worldwide. Since the

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only other language I know is Spanish, that is as far as I've gotten. While studying abroad in Madrid in the Spring of 2008, I took advantage of the Spanish editions of *Harry Potter* that my host family owned, and read the first book in Spanish. This led to many vigorous discussions around the dinner table, giving me first-hand proof that *Harry Potter* is universal: it allowed me to connect with my host family, forming a bond across cultural and linguistic barriers that persists today. Unfortunately, my eleven-year-old host sister would have been devastated had I hijacked her copy of *Harry Potter y la piedra filosofal*, the original edition that I read, but I have recently purchased my own edition in Spanish, and am delighting in rediscovering the different word choices between *castellano* and English.

Reading has always been my hobby and my passion, so much so that one of my punishments when I was young was the retraction of a promised visit to the local public library. With *Harry Potter*, this passion has expanded beyond the pages of a single novel, to seven novels and their various editions. My reason for collecting different editions of these books is simple: the British and Spanish editions are a further extension and exploration of the world Rowling has created, a world that is so powerful that it is not only my own personal escape, but the escape and delight of hundreds of millions of others around the world. I am proud of my interest and my participation in this fandom, and I consider myself lucky to be a part of this generation, the generation that got to experience *Harry Potter* from the beginning and truly understand its phenomenon.

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Note: The MLA citations for the British adult and children's editions are the same.