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THE CONTRARIAN

Outing Dumbledore. J.K. Rowling brings a beloved character out of the closet. Here's why it's no gay triumph

BY JOHN CLOUD

WHEN J.K. ROWLING SAID AT CARNEGIE Hall that Albus Dumbledore—her Aslan, her Gandalf, her Yoda—was gay, the crowd apparently sat in silence for a few seconds and then burst into wild applause. I'm still sitting in silence. I feel a bit like I did when we learned too much about Mark Foley and Larry Craig: you are not the role model I'd hoped for as a gay man.

Yes, it's nice that gays finally got a major character in the sci-fi/fantasy universe. Until now, we had been shut out of the major franchises. J.R.R. Tolkien wrote a rich supply of homoeroticism into *The Lord of the Rings*—all those men and hobbits and elves singing to one another during long, womanless quests. The books and their film versions feature tender scenes between Frodo and Samwise. But in the end, Sam marries Rosie and fathers 13 children.

Thirteen! Got something to prove, hobbit?

Other fantasy worlds have presented gay (or at least gay-seeming) characters, but usually they are, literally, inhuman. George Lucas gave us the epicene C-3PO and the little butch R2-D2, and their Felix-Oscar dialogue suggests the banter of a couple of old queens who have been keeping intergalactic house for millenniums. But their implied homosexuality is quite safe. There is no real flesh that could actually entangle. Similarly, there was a girl-on-girl plot in 1995 on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, but let me spare you a fanboy summary by noting merely that the two girls weren't girls—they were gender-complex aliens called Trills—and they only kissed.

So along comes Rowling with Dumbledore—a human being, a wizard even, an indisputable hero and one of the most beloved figures in children's literature. Shouldn't I be happy to learn he's gay?

Yes, except: Why couldn't he tell us himself? The *Potter* books add up to more than 800,000 words before Dumbledore dies in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, yet Rowling couldn't spare two of those words to help define a central character's emotional identity: "I'm gay." We can only conclude that Dumbledore saw his homosexuality as shameful. His silence suggests a lack of personal integrity that is completely out of character.

I had always given the *Potter* books a pass on the lack of gay characters because, especially at first, they were intended for little kids. But particularly with the appearance of the long, violent later books, Rowling allowed her witches and wizards to grow up, to get zits and begin romances, to kill and die. It seemed odd that not even a minor student character at Hogwarts was gay, especially since Rowling was so p.c. about inventing magical creatures of different races and species, incomes, national origins and developmental abilities. In a typical passage, Blaise Zabini is described as a "tall black boy with high cheekbones and long, slanting eyes." Would it have been so difficult to write a line in which Zabini takes the exquisitely named Justin Finch-Fletchley to the Yule Ball?

And then there's Dumbledore himself. Sure, he's heroic. His twinkling eyes, his flowing manteau, his unflinching wisdom—Rowling made it impossible not to revere him. But here is a gay man as desexed as any priest—and, to uncomfortably extend the analogy, whose greatest emotional bond is with an adolescent boy: scarred, orphaned, needy Harry. Rowling said that in her conception of his character, Dumbledore had fallen in love with Gellert Grindelwald long ago, when the two were just teenagers. But Grindelwald turned out to be evil—Rowling's Hitler, in fact—which apparently broke Dumbledore's heart.

As far as we know, Dumbledore had no fully realized romance in all his 115 years—just a lifetime spent around children and, for the seven years we know him, a fascination with the boy Potter. That's pathetic and frustratingly stereotypical. It's difficult to believe someone as wise and sane as Dumbledore couldn't find at least one wizard his age to take to the Three Broomsticks.

Am I making too much of this? Undoubtedly. Some of the best *Star Trek* fan fiction involves steamy Kirk-Spock love affairs. So it will be with the *Potter* world, as Rowling has acknowledged. We are now all free to imagine a gay life more whole and fulfilling than the one Rowling gave Dumbledore. But it would have been better if she had just let the old girl rest in peace. ■

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