

“Realism and Race: The Fictional Histories of J. K. Rowling’s *Pottermore*”

If genre is best understood as a “set of expectations” (Cobley) rather than fixed categories, as a performance contingent upon an audience’s expectations as much as the text’s form and content (Goldman), then readers of *Harry Potter* in 2017 are experiencing Rowling’s series as a performance of realism.

The texts of *Pottermore* – fictional histories of the wizarding world – have prompted readers’ concerns about Rowling’s success at performing realism – the realism of race, ethnicity, and cultural heritage beyond Great Britain. Conversations on social media and other online venues demonstrate the sometimes contradictory expectations that Rowling and her readers have about the relationship between life and art, between history and story. Readers and scholars (Keene, Reese, Young Lee, and Sepsey) have mapped Rowling’s appropriations and misappropriations of Native American cultures, exploring in detail the political, cultural, and affective consequences of “History of Magic in North America” for its readers as well as the authorial position from which Rowling writes this fictional history. These responses help us understand the extent to which the world of Rowling’s series depends on and offers itself as realism – and why the fantasy of *Pottermore* consequently fails for a number of readers.

Through its style, tone, and bibliographic codes, “History of Magic in North America” initiates a set of narrative and ethical reading practices more akin to historiography than fantasy, with realism as the link between the two. “History of Magic in North America” may be attentive to the ways that literary techniques inform the practice of history (White, LaCapra), but the resulting fictional history does not, like Rowling’s novels, foster awareness for its readers about the politics of story-telling. When this fictional history fails to meet readers’ expectations through misappropriation or misrepresentation of Native American cultures, “History of Magic in North America” creates a sizeable gap between Rowling’s efforts at narrative realism and readers’ lived experience of the past and the present. For these readers, the narrative result is a compromised fantasy, a failed performance of fantastic realism – and, for many, a failed object of art.