

Harry Potter and the Reporters under Fire?

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Is J K Rowling's Rita Skeeter the new face of the fictional journalist? One reporter looks at the less than magical portrayal by authors of hacks on the job...

Quidditch brooms at the ready: this Autumn heralds the latest film adaptation in the Harry Potter franchise.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire presents a fourth year for Harry, Ron and Hermione at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, introducing a plethora of new characters into the J K Rowling universe – including investigative reporter Rita Skeeter.

In recent years, popular culture has accepted the negative stereotype of a sensationalist, dishonest reporter, willing to do anything to get the scoop and Skeeter follows this model: she tails Harry everywhere in her efforts to get the exclusive story on 'The Boy That Lived'.

The Daily Prophet reporter is clearly not what she seems; little is given away about her beyond her Quick Quotes Quill – the note-taking device that records Skeeter's interviews but what the Quill chooses to write down is often very different from the words coming out of the interviewee's mouth.

When interviewing Harry in the broom closet during the Goblet of Fire, it is clear that Skeeter knows exactly what story she is going to write before the 'acid-green' Quill has even been taken out. It is always looking for the sensationalist angle in a style Dumbledore labels 'enchantingly nasty'.

The last 50 years have seen the fictional reporter figure degenerate from a literal superhero status – The Daily Planet's Clarke Kent and The Daily Bugle's budding photographer Peter Parker – to such intrusive and duplicitous sleazy tabloid creations as spawned by Ms Rowling.

And Skeeter does not stand alone in this new school of literary journalism. Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events also features reporting in a bad light, with the Snicket world permeated with stories from The Daily Punctilio: whose motto 'News in fits of print' deliciously parodies the New York Times's tagline of 'News that's fit to print'.

The Punctilio carries stories that show little, if any, background research into the subject matter, often running on rumour with comical spelling mistakes and wrongly-named characters featured.

Their star reporter Geraldine Julienne matches Rita Skeeter pound-for-pound with her hunt for the Big Story – whether it is remotely true or not seems to be mere details.

In Snicket's Unauthorised Autobiography, Julienne even admits in a letter: 'I've never been good with names but I still think I'm a pretty good reporter … and sometimes I write rumours, or things I make up, instead of facts.'

This negative view towards the press, with constant suggestions of incompetence, persists throughout the entire series, with the Daily Punctilio always willing to proclaim some untruth that puts the protagonists on the rack.

It is learnt early on in the film that Snicket himself is chronicling the stories of the Baudelaire children whilst on the run following an accusing article printed by the newspaper that fingers him as the culprit for a crime he did not commit.

But surely it wasn't always this way? In the world of literature when did the figure of the investigative reporter shy away from the crusader for justice and the discoverer of shady wrongdoings into the trashy world that inhabits such journalists as those found in the works of Rowling and Lemony Snicket?

Back in 1929, in the comic strip of a Belgian newspaper, was the first sighting of Tintin – Georges Remi's intrepid reporter who took on the whole world in over 70 years of uncovering shady truths and saving the day.

In his time, Tintin, with the ever-present Snowy at his side, unmasked dozens of spies, thwarted hell-bent mad scientists, saved countless villages and generally stuck up for the little guy: none more evident than the reporter's first outing in 1929's controversial Tintin in the Land of the Soviets.

The softly spoken journo is often sent out to exotic locations in order to sniff out a story by his Editor but often gets more than he bargains for, as his snooping inevitably leads to a tumble headfirst into a murky underworld.

Tintin's inventiveness and resourcefulness reflect all of the qualities expected in any newsroom, with none of the

negative sociopathic connotations of being a journalist that have crept into consciousness during the first few years of the new century.

The trust and respect shown in Tintin during his investigations seem a far stretch from the unethical practices of Rita Skeeter in the Goblet of Fire: trapping a young boy in a broom closet for a forced interview, the final transcription of which is unlikely to resemble anything that was actually said.

This portrayal of the 21st Century journalist, even in a children's book, is surely worrying for anyone involved in journalism: a profession that could be perceived as a band of double-crossing distorting deviants.

Books no longer feature journalists as the pursuers of justice, on the right side of the battle between good and evil.

It is a sign of the times when it is a rarity to hear the press mentioned in the pages of a novel without following such ominous phrases as "hounded by the...";

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