

Eliza Dresang and the Boy Who Lived

Colette Drouillard, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Library and Information Studies
Valdosta State University

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By Colette Drouillard, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Library and Information Studies, Valdosta State University

Eliza Dresang's expertise in children's and young adult literature is evident through the wide range of books, articles, committees, and projects she wrote or contributed to over the course of her career. Her interest in Harry Potter was a very small and seemingly minor component of her entire body of work; however, this series of books and the impact they had on young readers captivated her attention in a variety of ways over the course of the publication of the books and continued until the time of her death.

Dresang's work initially focused on two areas: gender and censorship. She first addressed the issue of Harry Potter and censorship as "lessons for the digital age."¹ She discussed the relentless challenges made to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and the six subsequent books.² In 2011 she returned to the issue of censorship in a *VOYA* article "Teens Fight for the Right to Read, Write, and Speak," with discussion of an incident in Zeeland, Michigan, where the superintendent issued a directive that the first three Harry Potter books be removed from school libraries and no future books in the series be purchased. A group of infuriated students, backed by the American Library Association and other anti-censorship organizations, established the website *Kidspeak: Where Kids Speak Up for Free Speech* (no longer available). More than 18,000 tweens and teens across the country joined *Kidspeak* to protect the right to read. Under this pressure, the superintendent reversed his decision.³ In the only Harry Potter challenge to go to court, Dakota Counts, supported by her parents, stood up for her right to read the Harry Potter books without her parents' written permission. In *Counts v. Cedarville School District*, District Court Judge Hendren ruled that the school district must place no restrictions on circulation of the books.

Dresang's outspoken participation in the support of children's right to access literature has been recognized in articles and books; however, it is the topic of the character Hermione Granger and the role of gender where she truly provides a perceptive perspective that continues to be debated and discussed. Dresang's 2012 essay "Hermione Granger and the Heritage of Gender" has been cited many times as a foundation of the study of gender in the Harry Potter novels. In it Dresang finds that Hermione is portrayed as a bookish individual who supports and guides Harry through her research and work. She is the dominant force in Harry's success until the sixth novel, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, where her role as Harry's educator is taken over by Dumbledore. Dresang sees Hermione as being far more successful than she is made out to be by other literary critics, such as Farah Mendlesohn, who have also focused on this topic.⁴ Dresang points out that Hermione gains agency and is able to take more control of her situation through her own actions than Mendlesohn gives her credit for. Dresang finds evidence in the text to be considerably more optimistic about Hermione's self-determination through her insistence about being sorted by the Hat and her refusal to be deterred from her purposes, whether it be learning, admonishing about rules, or championing the underdog.

Dresang argues that the Harry Potter novels are, in fact, feminist in nature.⁵ She bases her analysis on what Rowling has actually written, and not on what Rowling could or should have written; moreover, Dresang refuses to view Rowling's writing as female subjectivity seeking to confirm itself through discursive strategies of the fictional text. On the other hand, numerous comments and interviews given by Rowling confirm Dresang's opinion that the author did not write her novels as consciously feminist, i.e. with the express intention of promoting the equality of women.⁶

Dresang argues in defense of Hermione and Professor McGonagall, but does so by

looking at the books and the characters through various feminist lenses that offer a multiplicity of readings. Some critics, for example, are critical of Hermione's plastic surgery in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, where Hermione's big front teeth are straightened and made smaller, and her hair is no longer bushy when she attends the Yule Ball with Viktor Krum. But Dresang acknowledges that feminist criticism is not monolithic and discusses the different ways in which Hermione's actions can be viewed using various feminist approaches: "Radical-libertarian feminists maintain that females have the right to do whatever they want to with their bodies, while radical-cultural feminists would more likely disapprove of using the body in this manner to attract male attention."⁷ Dresang acknowledges that the portrayal of gender in Rowling's novels creates a "mixed and inconclusive picture," and that the books do not represent utopian possibilities but instead depict "the far less than ideal reality of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries."⁸

Dresang distinguishes between caricature and stereotype characters. Literary caricature is a representation that includes comic exaggeration in the description of the internal or external characteristics of a character and always refers to the individual. Stereotype refers to a group and represents a mental picture that a society has created about that group, as well as simplified opinions, prejudice, etc.⁹ Rowling herself has mentioned that she based the character of Hermione on a "caricature" of herself when she was younger.¹⁰ In the first novel, Hermione is unable to suppress her boastful nature while on the train to Hogwarts and tells everyone that she has already read numerous books, that she knows everything about a variety of magical beings, and that she is intimately acquainted with Harry Potter's history. Hermione has not yet learned how to share her knowledge with others without alienating them in the process. Another aspect of the author that is apparent through Hermione is her dedication to the rights of other beings (e.g., minorities, the

poor). Rowling used to work for Amnesty International in London and was involved with the problem of human rights in Africa. In the novels, Hermione fiercely fights for the rights of the House-Elves, which does not reverberate well with her classmates.

According to Dresang, the stereotypes in Hermione's characterization are reflected in her hysterical, timid, and fearful behavior, as well as the language that Rowling uses to describe this behavior. These are typical terms connected with the "weaker" sex (crying, sobbing), and in the novels they are never used to describe male characters. This leads to the false interpretation of female characters as weak or comical, which is unacceptable in feminist criticism. In spite of this, Dresang views Hermione as a positive character because she is a perfect example of the idea that possessing information and knowledge leads to power. Thanks to the many books she has read, Hermione often saves the other characters, and her incredible industry, which sometimes borders on stubbornness, contributes to some readers' misconstrued view of her as invulnerable and indestructible. Regarding Hermione's crying and sobbing, Dresang points out that Rowling stated several times that she had never cried herself, so Hermione's hysterical outbursts and weeping occur too often for us to view them as a credible development of her character. This behavior is completely inconsistent with her key role in the novels. Dresang sees in this a deliberate exaggeration of characterization concealing some kind of special agenda by Rowling.

However, Hermione's character develops from novel to novel, and the above-mentioned descriptions are gradually replaced by those with stronger adjectives and verbs as she becomes more powerful and focused on world problems. Roberta Seelinger Trites calls such an approach "subverting stereotypes," which can appear over the course of a novel, although the hero or heroine does not possess any particular abilities or powers at the beginning.¹¹ Hermione's character grows beyond the stereotype of the weak woman/geek and gradually attains abilities

usually attributed to male heroes, a process that could be termed androgynization. It should be pointed out that not all feminists agree with such an androgynous approach to feminism, as

Dresang discusses:

While radical-libertarian feminists believe both men and women should be androgynous, that is, have access to the full range of so-called male and female characteristics, radical-cultural feminists look more to the enhancement of the so-called female qualities.

Although the series is not finished, by book four Hermione seems to be in the process of combining both masculine and feminine traits and thereby subverting the stereotypes imposed on her in earlier books.¹²

Dresang's Radical Change theory, first described in her 1999 book, *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age*, was developed in the mid-1990s. It serves as a lens through which to explain and use contemporary literature to examine youth growing up in the Digital Age. It identifies changes in forms and formats, perspectives, and boundaries in this body of literature—all changes related to the interactivity, connectivity, and access of the Digital Age.

When Dresang first conceived the Radical Change theory, almost everyone agreed that digital technologies were changing radically, yet almost no one acknowledged the concomitant change in a growing cadre of printed books for youth. Moreover, those who did take note of the changes in books saw little or no relationship between these alterations and the Digital Age in which they were written, illustrated, and published. Consequently, in discussions of the integration of technology in education, printed books were often either forgotten or treated as a completely different, unrelated entity.

In her 2008 reflection on her book, Dresang realized that Radical Change was then and is still the only theory that makes this connection between printed books for youth and the digital

environment. Radical Change is what is known as a spatial/temporal theory, rooted in the belief that authors and illustrators are influenced by the time and place within which they write. As Dresang points out, Mikhail Bakhtin noted that “for the purpose of his writing, an author must create entire worlds and, in doing so, is forced to make use of the organizing categories of the real world in which he lives.”¹³ Radical Change theory fits this tradition. It recognizes that temporal and spatial relationships in the digital world have “resulted in historically manifested narrative forms,” in this case narrative forms of interactivity, connectivity, and access in books for youth.¹⁴

The principles upon which Radical Change are based explain how this offline/online synergy has grown and developed. Dresang finds that the Harry Potter books precipitated the largest online literary community in Internet history, a community of intense book discussion, role-playing, and creative writing. Dresang concludes that Radical Change predicts even more synergy of media as the Digital Age principles mature. The synergy created by shared interactivity, connectivity, and access between the print and digital environments makes all types of media involved more dynamic.

In 2014 Dresang, in collaboration with Kathleen Campana, turned to a new yet related element found in the Harry Potter series, that of the intratextual repetition used by Rowling. Dresang and Campana discuss how Rowling’s intratextuality ultimately offers readers pleasure when they recognize that uncontextualized hints—references not discernible as significant upon first reading—are available to be recalled and found.¹⁵ While foreshadowing is commonplace in literature, Rowling’s particular type of intratextuality appears to be unique.

One example of intratextuality discussed by Dresang and Campana involves the character of Mrs. Figg, Harry’s cat-loving neighbor. Mrs. Figg first appears in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* when the Dursleys leave Harry with her and go out to celebrate Dudley’s

birthday. She reappears at the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and again at the beginning of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. In this latter appearance, it is revealed that Mrs. Figg is a squib (a member of a wizarding family who does not have magical powers) and that she has been keeping an eye on Harry for Dumbledore the entire time he has lived with the Dursleys. Dresang and Campana find that it was therefore possible for a reader to deduce that Mrs. Figg does not invite Harry to tea only to be nice, but also to look out for him. They conclude that astute readers would therefore be able to deduce that while Harry feels forgotten and ignored by Dumbledore, the headmaster is actually watching over Harry and is concerned for his welfare.

Although intertextuality is evident throughout Rowling's series, close analysis of her work by Dresang and Campana reveals that both within and across the seven volumes, she also employs self-citational intratextuality. Dresang and Campana define intratextual repetition as "repetition as adaptation or unfolding, repeating always with a difference."¹⁶ Rowling's uncommon use of intratextual repetition, simple or complex, begins with an insertion of the entity to be repeated (a person, an inanimate object, a place, or a magical spell), without any signal that this element is to be taken as particularly meaningful. But its repetition in another context and at a later point plays a significant role in furthering the story. With no contextual clues from the author, readers are on their own to discover these treasures, as if Rowling is saying, "Maybe it's something you need to find out for yourself."¹⁷ Dresang and Campana suggest that while Harry and his friends might call this type of repetition "transfiguration," they could also call it, simply, "magic."

Whereas intertextuality offers extra reading pleasure to the most informed readers, Dresang and Campana find that intratextuality offers rewards to a wider range of readers. Intratextuality within the Harry Potter books had not been discussed in any academic paper that

Dresang and Campana could locate, despite the dozens of examples of intratextual repetition in the series. They outline four examples, demonstrating their usefulness to four different types of readers, which they call the informed reader, the reflective reader, the astute reader, and the learning reader.¹⁸ Dresang and Campana conclude that Rowling's use of intratextuality extends the pleasure of being in the know—a pleasure normally offered only to the most informed readers through intertextuality—to any careful reader of the Harry Potter series. In effect, Rowling's use of intratextuality produces both the frame for the cultural unit of careful readers of the series and the means for various kinds of readers to fit within that frame.

Eliza Dresang's impact in the field of Harry Potter research is perhaps most impressive in that it was fueled by her passion for the books and for the community of readers that was created through reading these books. Her recognition of the potential impact that these books would have on readers was ahead of its time. Her ability to contribute a unique point of view on the impact of this series for readers has added an important perspective to the scholarship of Harry Potter, whether she was discussing the attempted censorship of the books, the way in which the role of Hermione Granger reflected gender, Rowling's use of intertextual repetition, or in her most self-reflective look at the series, the ways in which the Harry Potter books precipitated the largest online literary community in Internet history, as demonstrated by her own theory of Radical Change.

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