This article claims that J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, with its use of magic, frightening storylines, and character ambiguity is beneficial to children who are dealing with issues related to terror and terrorism. The author explains that the scenarios presented in Rowling’s series teach children strategies for coping with both physical and psychological victimization, and argues that the series explores morality issues, allowing child readers to analyze terror-related questions such as why some people are considered evil, why difference is often believed to be bad, and why good people do bad things. It is acknowledged that many critics believe that the same elements claimed as beneficial in the essay are actually immoral and dangerous to child readers. These critics’ evaluations are countered in two ways: first, the author uses expert evidence to demonstrate that children are capable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality by the age of 5, making fantasy the most viable means for children to cope with terror; and second, the author examines and interprets specific passages within the series to demonstrate how various scenes lead children to explore important, yet frightening issues while remaining in an emotionally safe state. The author concludes that the series has proven to be more beneficial than harmful by presenting evidence gathered from actual child readers who state that the Harry Potter series has allowed them to confront and cope with terror and terrorism in their own lives.

KEY WORDS: terror; children’s literature; fantasy.

The terrorist attacks on the United States in the fall of 2001 had great impact on human life throughout much of the world, and the realm of children’s literature was certainly not left untouched by the shock. Since the beginning of the frenzied success of Harry Potter, critics have almost made a game out of speculating the series’ demise, and
following the attacks, critics and writers began to focus attention away from the series. It appeared as if the world had changed and that *Harry Potter*’s brand of magical fantasy just might have run its popular course. Almost immediately following September 11, articles downplaying the *Harry Potter* series gained prevalence in the American media. The *New York Times*’ Maureen Dowd (2001) claimed “[a]fter 9/11 . . . many kids seem in the mood for something a bit darker” (p. 9), but she neglected the fact that children had been reading “dark” books well before September 11, 2001. Furthermore, *Harry Potter* is “darker” than Dowd realizes. The actual success of *Harry Potter* both before and after the attacks reinforces that fact. Rather than dying in the face of global turmoil, the series has continued to thrive. The key may be that, as a multinational series, *Harry Potter*’s central themes have reached children in many different countries who experience all types of terror and witness battles between “good” and “bad” every day. Though the series explores many themes, the themes of terror as a result of large-scale, national strikes and of the battle between good and evil are central to Rowling’s work.

Despite the fact that writers and critics have scrambled to add the name *Harry Potter* to their work for the past few years, comparatively little has been done in relating the importance of the *Harry Potter* series to the study of terror. Rather than studying the series for its positive effects on children, many critics have continued to denounce the series according three areas of concern. The most vociferous critics of the novels, primarily conservative Christians, cite the theme of magic as inherently anti-Christian. Additionally, the charge by many critics, regardless of religious affiliation, has been that the series contains an inappropriate amount of violence and terror for a children’s series. Finally, many have charged that the series promotes ambiguous morality with the use of ambiguous characters, such as Harry, who often grapple with morality issues. Emphasis on the magic, the violence, and the character ambiguity is important but not for the reasons these critics claim. More beneficial than detrimental to children, these criticized areas of Rowling’s novels are precisely what enable the series to confront terror issues.

Instead of making the series immoral, the magic, frightening storylines, and character ambiguity all operate together to explore a vast array of morality issues. Further, these aforementioned components allow readers to tackle terror-related issues safely. What makes a person evil? Is it bad to have different beliefs or appearances? Why are groups of people considered evil? Do good people make poor decisions or do bad things? With whom do you side when the indicator of good and evil is ambiguous? According to Daniel Handler (2001), the pseudonymous Lemony Snicket, answers to questions such as