

Harry Potter, My Daughter, Elihu Smith, and Me



Near the climax of his second book of adventures, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York, 1999), the world's favorite British prepubescent nerd-turned-wizard nearly kills himself by reading a diary. What happens, without giving away too much, is this: At the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, in an alternate dimension somewhere near London, Harry finds a diary someone has tried to flush down a toilet. "The little book lay on the floor, nondescript and soggy." Curiously, it's blank, but Harry keeps "picking it up and turning the pages as though it were a story he wanted to finish." Eventually he discovers that when he *writes* in the diary, it writes back to him. "My name is Harry Potter," he writes, dipping his quill in scarlet ink. "Oozing back out of the page, in his very own ink, came words Harry had never written. 'Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?'"



J.K. Rowling. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. New York: Scholastic, 1999.

After they've exchanged pleasantries, the diary, once owned by Tom Riddle, a former Hogwarts student, promises to reveal secrets about certain mysterious events at the school. It makes this promise by offering to let Harry step inside Riddle's memory to witness scenes from the school's past, half a century earlier. "*Let me show you,*" the diary pleads. And then, "Harry saw that the little square for June thirteenth seemed to have turned into a miniscule television screen. His hands trembling slightly, he raised the book to press his eye against the little window, and before he knew what was happening, he was tilting forward; the window was widening, he felt his body leave his bed, and he was pitched headfirst through the opening in the page, into a whirl of color and shadow."

Once inside, Harry is sort of like Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*: he enters rooms, overhears conversations, feels as if he's there, but no one can see him. He gathers a certain amount of information about the past, thinks he has solved the mystery plaguing the school, then whirls back out of the diary to land on his dormitory bed.

A few chapters later, Harry encounters Tom Riddle again, only this time the diarist has escaped the volume in which he had been prisoner. He's a little blurry around the edges. "Are you a ghost?" Harry asks. "A memory," Riddle responds. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years." It doesn't take long for Harry to realize that Tom Riddle wants to kill him. Riddle has learned that Harry, in Riddle's distant future, would foil the diarist's most nefarious schemes. Harry also realizes that the "memories" he witnessed, when he had been sucked into the diary, were a sham. Riddle hadn't let Harry see the whole truth; his distortions had led Harry to false conclusions in his detective work. After protracted verbal sparring followed by hand-to-hand combat, Harry defeats Riddle by stabbing the diary. Scarlet ink spurts out of it "in

torrents, streaming over Harry's hands, flooding the floor" like blood. Riddle's "memory" vanishes.

For eighteen months or so, as my six-year-old daughter and I read nightly from Harry's four volumes of adventures, we felt much the way he does when he plunges, unexpectedly, into Tom Riddle's diary. Or even when he first boards the Hogwarts Express, from an invisible train platform at King's Cross station, and heads to the wizarding academy. Harry's awkwardness, his orphaned status, his cruel, nonmagical relatives, make him a sympathetic figure, particularly to preteens who feel the world's injustice on a regular basis. But another aspect of the books' appeal, I think, stems from the fundamental way the series is *about* the act of reading itself. In other words, my daughter and I, as we get lost in these stories, are *supposed* to feel somewhat like Harry stumbling into magical dimensions and enchanted diaries. His imaginative adventures mimic readers' adventures of imagination. Harry doesn't nod off like Alice or Dorothy. It's almost as if *Harry* has plunged headlong into a good book, and we've simply gone along for the ride.

Perhaps it's due to the fact that I spend a good portion of my own time reading and writing about (and sometimes feeling lost in) diaries, but Harry's encounter with Tom Riddle's magical memoir is one of my favorite episodes in the series. The interactive diary has provided me with images that resurface every time I open a diary I'm studying or writing about. What would it be like to step inside the memory of the diarist? To experience a diary as if it were a video replay? What would I ask an enchanted diary if it one day spontaneously responded to my marginal annotations? Playing around with these questions has required me to think hard about my own encounters with diaries, and about the relationship more broadly between a reader in the present and a text that "preserves" a person from the past.

What Tom Riddle's diary captures most of all, I think, is the fantasy of encountering a perfectly preserved personality, fully capable of conversing across time and space. Both in and out of the text, Harry encounters Riddle as a three-dimensional, if blurry, being, conscious of Harry's presence as a reader. Inside the diary, Harry watches the past the way he would watch TV. But the fantasy of gaining this sort of access to a diarist's experience is also related to an illicit tingle readers of diaries sometimes get. Reading a diary—even if its author is several hundred years dead—sometimes feels voyeuristic. I confess to having secretly read friends' and roommates' diaries when I was younger, hoping to find out what they *really* thought about me. It's the same search for candor that gives diary readers the sense that we're experiencing something that's "truer" than other forms of literary writing or historical record. Tom Riddle uses this notion to draw Harry into his diary: "*I always knew there would be those who would not want this diary read.*" The knowledge he can offer Harry is dangerous, exclusive, and, he would have Harry believe, absolutely true.

Even as it suggests a reader's wish to converse with someone from another time,

Riddle's diary serves as a perfect figure of what literary critics sometimes call "reader response" or "reception" criticism. These ways of reading involve a constant awareness that we can't really encounter our subjects as three-dimensional beings, and that even if we could, it might not help us get at the "truth" any better. At the risk of crude oversimplification, reader response theorists hold that a text's "meaning" is provided by a reader, not a writer. When we read, we create meaning based on our previous experiences and subjective views. Reception theorists, operating from a similar set of assumptions, like to think about books historically, to ask, for example, how the same work might have been differently read in different times and places. What *Hamlet* meant in nineteenth-century New York may not be what it meant to Elizabethan Londoners, because different viewers and readers assign the play different meanings in different contexts.

Harry Potter's experience with Tom Riddle's diary seems to bear out these notions of how meaning is made: the book is blank until Harry himself starts writing in it. And Tom Riddle only understands current events through his readers, through what they bring to their encounters with the text. Riddle gains clarity, takes shape, and eventually escapes the diary's confines by feeding off his readers' emotions.

As an undergraduate English major in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was well trained by literary critics to discount any notion that we can recover an author's intentions. The "death of the author," we were informed, had been proclaimed and little mourned some twenty-odd years earlier. We were never to assume we could know what an author "really meant," and most of all, we weren't to attempt literary interpretation by recourse to an author's biography. If an author seemed to be writing autobiographically, we were to understand such declarations of "selfhood" as fictions, as performances. Coherent "selfhood" was out; "subjectivity," a more limited, perspectival notion, was in. With these principles in mind, we were to leave the author in the grave; the text would suggest its own meanings, or suggest to us how to create one. We were the authors. These cautionary tales have sometimes served me well. They remind me that any attempt to encounter the past is limited by fragmentary sources, if not by the inability of language to "represent" something perfectly in the first place.

What happens when the stories people tell about their own lives, the ways they narrate their everyday experiences, are every bit as interesting as the stories they publish as literature? What happens when the two sets of stories overlap?

Oddly, however, one result of these post-1970s currents in literary studies was a turn *toward* historical approaches to literature. Or toward a certain kind of history, anyway, since "literary history" still didn't include that most slippery of all historical enterprises, the writing of biography. Letting go of

the quest to reclaim the “true” past (including the relationship between author and text) has lead literary scholars to treat all writing as literature, and to proclaim loudly that all history writing is akin to writing historical fiction. If diaries can’t be relied on for accurate representation of the past, as this argument would maintain, then we need to read them much the way we read novels. Even as fictions, they can still give us some sense of history—especially of the history of human subjectivity—without forcing us to rely on them for the truth about what “really happened” or for insight into an author’s intentions. If Harry Potter learned anything from his encounter with Tom Riddle’s diary, it should be that things didn’t necessarily happen the way the diarist would have you believe.



James Sharples. “Elihu Smith.” Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

This sort of advice doesn’t accord easily, though, with the kinds of (perverse) pleasures reading a diary can bring. For several years I’ve worked closely with one diary in particular, the diary of Elihu Hubbard Smith, a physician and poet who lived in New York City in the 1790s. Though I didn’t find Smith’s diary in a toilet, I did stumble across it (or into it?) in a way that felt like Harry’s headlong fall. As a literary critic I had been grappling with the novels of Smith’s sometime roommate and closest friend, Charles Brockden Brown, best known today as the author of *Wieland* (1798), *Ormond* (1799), *Arthur Mervyn* (1799-1800), and *Edgar Huntly* (1799). Readers of Brown’s gothic novels realize how frustrating his quirky writing can be: obscure, incomplete, dialogic, difficult to pin down in terms of its engagement with contemporary politics in particular. Reading criticism on Brown’s novels I realized that critics had never abandoned biographical claims as fully as they advised. Literary historians often read the novels, which were produced during the partisan rancor of the late 1790s, as advocating one political position or another, often by associating Brown with Smith and his other friends who formed an intellectual circle they called the Friendly Club. Those who recognized Smith’s conservative political bent assumed he must have won over Brown to Federalism. Those who knew that the club included the Jeffersonian politician Samuel Mitchill assumed the club—and therefore Brown and Brown’s novels—must have had Republican allegiances. Early on in my study of Brown, when a computer search alerted me to the 1974 publication of Smith’s diary, I headed into the library stacks to retrieve it, determined to settle the matter of Brown’s politics once and for all.

What I found in Smith’s diary—nearly four hundred thousand words written in just three years—was a text every bit as entrancing as Brown’s bizarre novels. At random I opened the enormous quarto volume to a page near the center. Smith was drafting a long letter to a childhood friend, Theodore Dwight, in which he defended his loss of faith in Christianity. Something about the letter—its passionate defense of intellectual freedom, the courage it took

to face down a fiercely evangelical Dwight, whose older brother, Timothy, was known as "Pope" Dwight of Yale University—made me feel almost as if I had tumbled through a miniature TV screen and landed in a candlelit New York bachelor's apartment two hundred years earlier. In addition to detailing these religious dilemmas, Smith's diary was packed with fascinating narratives of city social life, literary endeavors, scientific enterprises, and two yellow fever epidemics, the second of which took Smith's life when he was only twenty-seven. Before his early death, he had published the first anthology of American poems and founded the first American medical journal. In his diary he had drafted letters to famous Americans and to British literati; indulged crushes on married older women; fantasized about the notoriety he and his friends would gain if Brown's fiction generated scandal. While the diary only complicated, for various reasons, the issue of Brown's politics, it quickly raised for me questions that would alter my approach to literary history: What happens when the stories people tell about their own lives, the ways they narrate their everyday experiences, are every bit as interesting as the stories they publish as literature? What happens when the two sets of stories overlap?

Behind these questions was a recognition that I actually cared about the *people* who produced the texts I read. Sitting in the New-York Historical Society one summer afternoon, I held my breath, chills up my spine, as I read one of the last letters Smith had written before his death of yellow fever. The letter described the prevailing epidemic, but Smith had no way of knowing that within days he would be dead, just as he had no idea that the mosquitoes that kept him up at night were the carriers of the deadly disease. Was he already sick when he wrote this letter, now faded, yellow, brittle? What traces of his DNA might still be preserved in the document I was handling? Later I would walk the streets of lower Manhattan, feeling out the distances between Pine Street, where Smith had once lived, and the Battery, where he took his constitutional walks. Was this safe territory for a literary critic? After all, deep-rooted training taught me not to trust biographical approaches to interpreting texts, taught me that any biographical reconstruction was a "fiction." I shouldn't let my desire to piece together biographical information bear too heavily on my readings of the literature these people produced, *including* the diary.

Like most diaries, Smith's offers readers the sense that they are receiving exclusive information. Yet just as Tom Riddle only let Harry see what he wanted him to see, Smith often wrote with particular audiences in mind. Much of the diary is made up of letters like the one to Dwight: here Smith's audience awareness should be self-evident. His medical writing envisions its own set of readers, too. But the question of audience is more complicated the more one reads. Smith also frequently read aloud from his diary to friends, or swapped journals with them after long separations. He burned early volumes, unfortunately, to prevent their obsession with unrequited love from ever having an audience. And he intended, at some point, to publish his journals as a memorial not only of his own life and thinking, but as a record of the many illustrious people—Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Rush, or John Adams, the father of his friend Charles—he knew and observed. "To those into whose hands my

papers may come, when I cease to exist," he wrote on one occasion, "they will be valuable: for my connections in many instances, have been with those, who either have been, or promise to be, in some good measure, distinguished actors in the scene around me." Perhaps Tom Riddle would remind us that such theatrical language is telling. "Audience beware," he might say. "The author of the diary you are about to read will likely come off as the hero of his story."

A few weeks ago my daughter offered a similar warning, unintentionally, when she brought home a diary of her entire first grade school year. Most entries recount what happened the previous day or what was planned for that day at school. For 26 February 2001 the assignment, apparently, was to chronicle what had happened over the previous week's school vacation. She writes: "On vacation I went to my friend's house and I went to the empres new grove. and I had hot coco when I got home. and I had another sleepofer with a difrint kid's house. and I went to disny on ice. and one time I stay'd up all night." Now, chances are good that she saw *The Emperor's New Groove* over vacation. I can't remember. But I'm pretty sure she didn't have a sleepover, and I know she has never been to Disney on Ice or—the ultimate fantasy of all—stayed up all night. Occasionally the diary includes other imagined events, such as swimming with the dolphins in Florida. Who's to say what prompted her to record these things? Are they her own fantasies? Were they prompted by the diary of the kid sitting next to her? Will some future reader be fooled into thinking these things happened? Am I fooled into thinking they say something fundamental about her psyche?

But are these entries really written by the same person? Did "I" write these entries? Do they have meaning outside what I assign them as an adult reader?

I have a diary of my own from around age six, another that covers to thirteen or so, and one more that runs from thirteen to nineteen. Since I don't actually remember the events I narrated when I was my daughter's age, who's to say they really happened the way I said they did, or what prompted me to record some things and not others? I'm struck by the way a bound diary suggests a continuity of selfhood, that life is like a story with beginning, middle, end; rising action; character development. Writing in the same volume, the thirteen-year-old who recorded daily life as part of an eighth grade English class is apparently the same person who, at age nineteen, recorded the agonies of a college freshman's love life. But are these entries really written by the same person? Did "I" write these entries? Do they have meaning outside what I assign them as an adult reader?

One of the most appealing aspects of Harry Potter's encounter with Riddle's text is that the diarist has been frozen in time. He remains sixteen years old and has no idea, until a reader informs him about his later life, what that future would hold. It's a difficult if not impossible task for readers of a

diary not to exploit their knowledge of the diarist's final outcome. Reading Smith's last few diary entries and letters makes me want to shout out warnings: "It's the mosquitoes! The mosquitoes!" It's impossible to read his long letter to Theodore Dwight, to watch their friendship erode due to their religious differences, without thinking of Smith's impending death, less than two years away. But should Smith's twenty-seven-year-old self necessarily be related to the Smith who published poems in the *Gazette of the United States* as a young man? Riddle would seem to suggest that we can attempt to let entries be informed by the past, but not necessarily by the future. My daughter warns that even the past's information might be misleading.

Tom's other warning—against privileging diaries as somehow more transparent than other historical records—is the same sort of warning my college English teachers had given me. But if this is the final truth about diary reading, if we're unable to place any confidence in the "reality" of what a diary records, how can we explain what remains uniquely seductive about texts like Smith's? Perhaps Riddle can offer answers here as well. Tom only knows what his readers have told him about life after the diary was written. In this way, as I've noted, he seems a perfect emblem for the relationship between a text and the reader who gives it meaning. But Tom also works *against* reader response theories in certain ways. He is not only a figure of audience response, but of an author's audience *awareness*. This suggests his agency in shaping the ultimate meanings his text might take and the uses to which it will be put. Tom has anticipated his readers. He hopes to use them, to outsmart them, to remain immortal through them. The story of Harry's encounter with Tom Riddle's diary offers a *modified* notion of reader response. When Harry initially discovers how the diary works, he carries out conversations with it, writing in it and receiving its answers. When he meets Riddle outside the text, the interaction is more physical, but still suggests that meaning is made as a reader *interacts* with a text, grapples with it, fights with it. The power is on both sides. It's in the constant negotiation with a diary, our awareness of its various audiences, our imagined conversations with its author, our suspicion of his or her motives, that we can begin to learn what such a text has to teach us.

If Tom and Harry warn that diaries, like other forms of writing, are misleading or limited in their representation of the past, they also remind us, perhaps, of why we constantly want to test those limits. Whether or not we want to admit it, we read diaries differently than we do novels because we want to believe they are letting us at least *approach* something that was once real. For years literary critics belied the death of the author in their occasional biographical references (even if only appealing to an author's gender, race, or apparent partisan affiliation) as evidence for a text's take on the culture that produced it, what it could tell us about "history." Admitting that biography can matter, that we can learn from the stories people told to make sense of their own experiences, that these stories can even help us interpret more overt fictions from the past, shouldn't threaten us, as long as we remain relatively skeptical about autobiographical truth claims. I know, for example,

that Brown's novels gain additional meanings when I bring to them my experience of reading Smith's diaries.

But Riddle may be most useful as a reminder that beyond the academic and historical uses we make of diaries, the texts have *personal* meanings and motivations, both in their production and reception, then and now. Those meanings and motivations warrant respect. Like Tom Riddle, Elihu Smith had his own reasons for writing: my task isn't simply to make meaning for his diary by reading and writing about it the way I do Brown's novels. It's to seek to recognize and understand his own acts of imagining, of meaning-making, the reasons why he wanted to preserve some version of himself, for whatever audience, and why he chose a diary as his vehicle. Addressing these issues can be dangerous for a literary critic. But only when we respect a diary's dangers can we, like Harry, thumb through its pages and "finish" the story. Scarlet ink and all.

This article originally appeared in issue 2.1 (October, 2001).

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