

# Why Tamora Pierce's *Protector of the Small* Quartet Should Have Been Gen Z's *Harry Potter*

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Submitted November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Having grown up Protestant Christian (the denomination switched every couple of years) in Southern Appalachia, I can firmly say that some of the choices Christian parents make when it comes to what their children are allowed to read are *really weird*. The whole “no *Harry Potter* in my good Christian household” thing is, from what I’ve gathered, a fairly widespread phenomenon. With my parents, it was mostly just comical, since I was encouraged to read *The Lord of the Rings*, which, in case you haven’t noticed, also has quite a bit of wizardry and magic involved. Growing up,

I was surrounded by kids who loved *Harry Potter*, but despite a childhood of sneaking

around my parents’ censorship to read what I wanted, I didn’t actually get around to reading any of the *Harry Potter* books until I was about sixteen.

Throughout my childhood, my friends had gushed about these books and their importance in their lives, so you could say my expectations for this supposedly phenomenal book series were through the roof. I thoroughly enjoyed the first three books – as much as I could



*Religious controversy over Harry Potter has been so frequent that there is an entire Wikipedia page dedicated to the topic.*

enjoy something that was solidly not in my usual genres of choice, which are realistic fiction and horror – but around *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (volume 4 of 7), I started to feel a bit betrayed. What exactly was up with this supposedly amazing magical world where the “good adults” sent a middle schooler to spend summers with people who abused him at every turn? How was I supposed to believe that the wizarding world was separate from that of Muggles when Easter and Christmas are celebrated at Hogwarts? These questions plagued me until about a hundred pages into *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (volume 5 of 7) at which point, thoroughly frustrated by the adults’ complete inability to recognize Harry’s obvious PTSD, I threw the book across the room and renounced it forever.

When asked – mostly by peers who had read the series as children – why I’d never bothered to finish the *Harry Potter* series, I would always talk about the lack of supportive adults (no, Sirius doesn’t count, neither do the Weasleys, they all need therapy) and the complete lack of Rowling having even a single person check up on Harry and help him process the trauma of watching one of his friends get murdered in front of him (among other things). Most people were quick to shrug that off, or give me a weak “oh, that makes sense,” and change the subject. But there was just something about *Harry Potter* that bothered me deeply, something I couldn’t really place as a sixteen-year-old homeschooler from middle of nowhere Tennessee.

During my undergraduate years in college, however, I’ve found an abundance of help placing names on more of the things that irk me about *Harry Potter* – and, by extension, the series’ author, J.K. Rowling. Ever thought about how Rowling’s goblins are in charge of the wizarding world’s banking, depicted with hooked noses, and profoundly greedy? Well, yes, you say, but most fantasy goblins are like that. How about the only Asian character in the series being named Cho Chang? That one is a bit harder to explain. And let’s not forget the entire

debacle with the happily enslaved house elves – a plot point I hate to even think about because of how obvious it seems to me that having a white girl go on a campaign to save a “happily enslaved” race is, at best, a truly odd choice for any writer to make. I wish I could say the issues with *Harry Potter* end there, but this is only the tip of the iceberg if we extend our critical eye to Rowling herself. The world-renowned author’s Twitter is an experience unto itself – you don’t even have to scroll back past July 2021 to find an example of her now-infamous transphobia, a sample of which you can see in the Tweet on the right.

*Harry Potter* is the story that my generation grew up with, handed

down from the millennials above us – a story without a single competent adult to give an abused child hope, a story full of antisemitism and racism, a story written by a staunchly transphobic person. From where I’m standing, it’s no wonder my generation grew up largely nihilistic, without any trust for adults – after all, even our beloved escapist fantasy world told us implicitly that there are no truly good, trustworthy, helpful adults to be found when we need them.

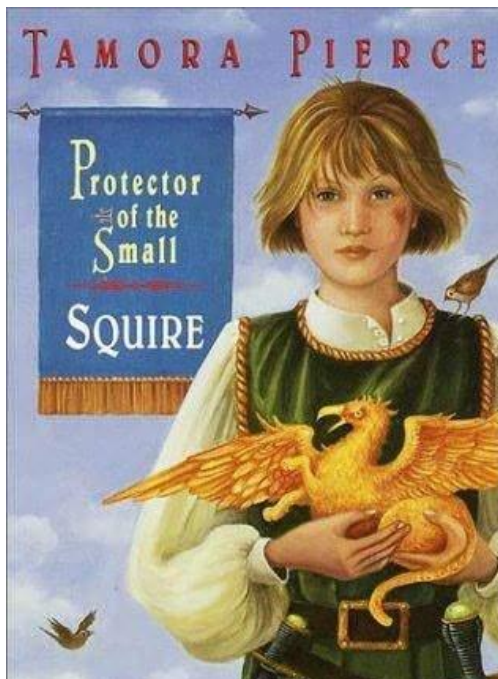
Despite the longing I felt to read *Harry Potter* throughout my childhood, as an adult I feel nothing but joy at the fact that I read Rowling’s work only when I was old enough to comprehend and pick up on even a small portion of the flaws. I also feel regret that my generation didn’t have a better story to escape into, a story that would give us hope. Fantasy



Screenshot of one of Rowling’s many transphobic Tweets.

books are almost always inherently escapist in nature, and I think this is a good thing. But what I craved as a child abuse survivor was a fantasy story that would let me escape into a world where, even if some adults just plain sucked, there were also just as many adults ready to help me out when I was in trouble, comfort me when I was sad, and support me in standing up for what I believed in. If I really wanted a hopeless story, the dystopian young adult fiction I read as an angsty teenager was right there.

It took me a long time to find a fantasy series that fit the type of escapism I wanted, and when I finally found it in Tamora Pierce's *Protector of the Small* (1999-2002) quartet, I couldn't help but wish that Pierce instead of Rowling had been the cornerstone author of my peers' childhood. Granted, I might be biased – the boy who recommended *Protector of the Small* to me when we first met is now my fiancé – but I think that Pierce's work has real merit for just about anyone.



Cover of the third book in the Protector of the Small quartet, featuring Kel and some of her animal friends.

The *Protector of the Small* quartet tells the story of Keladry of Mindelan, an intrepid ten-year-old from the fictional land of Tortall who dreams of becoming a knight. We watch Kel grow up throughout the series, just like Harry, and like Harry, Kel has an important destiny in store. Unlike Harry, though, Kel has no magical aptitude – despite living in a world populated with mages and magical creatures – and fortunately, she has a boatload of sympathetic adults on her side. Her idol, Alanna the Lioness, is forbidden by the king to talk to or mentor Kel since as the only current lady knight in

Tortall, Alanna could be accused of unfairly using magic to help Kel succeed. Regardless, Alanna sends Kel useful presents ranging from weapons to medicine for her training-incurred bruises. Kel's eventual knight master, Lord Raoul, refuses to be afraid of the rumors that surround him for taking Kel on as his squire, and as well as teaching Kel strategy and leadership, he even shows that he's willing to help with her personal problems. (There's a notably hilarious scene where Raoul offers to explain female puberty to Kel if she can't find a woman she's comfortable talking to about it.) Kel's parents are somewhat absent from the story, as Kel is usually at the king's court and while her parents are kept busy overseeing their lands, but they support her dreams and her autonomy. Kel's mother even recommends she get an anti-pregnancy charm at one point in the latter half of the series, when Kel starts to have an interest in one of her male friends.

Even the pages' training master, Lord Wyldon, eventually comes around to Kel. Despite initially forcing her to undergo a probation period at the beginning of her training as a knight, by the final book in the quartet he entrusts Kel with huge responsibilities, saying that she is the only knight in her age group he can trust to be in charge of a massive refugee camp. Not only are the adults supportive, but that *Protector of the Small* series title? The entire series is literally about Kel and her friends standing up for those who can't defend themselves – whether that's their bullied classmates, animals in danger, or abused children. There are also a fair number of people of color in the series, particularly for something that came out in the early 2000s – and none of their names are anything like Cho Chang.

Further dedicated – accidentally or not – to being Rowling's polar opposite, Pierce openly supports transgender people, as evidenced by a Tweet she directed at transgender people in the midst of an uproar over Rowling's transphobia following a lengthy essay posted by the

Harry Potter writer on her personal writing blog: “J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues”. Pierce’s Tweet speaks for itself, so I have placed not only the initial Tweet, but Pierce’s follow-up below:



Pierce has also said that Alanna, the heroine of *The Song of the Lioness* (1983-1988), the first series set in the Tortall world, is gender-fluid, although the term either did not exist when Pierce wrote *The Song of the Lioness* or was something she simply wasn't aware of. And yes, she

*has* messed up – not only with depicting transgender people in her work, but also with her depictions of gay characters and people of color. However, unlike Rowling, she has constantly worked to expand the range of diversity in her writing, and has consistently acknowledged her shortcomings and mistakes, as seen in the above Tweet.

I would recommend *Protector of the Small* or just about any of Tamora Pierce’s work to children and young adults searching for a fantasy world to call home long before I would even think of recommending *Harry Potter*, not only because of the stories themselves, but because of Tamora Pierce’s efforts to represent and advocate for everyone – especially those who may not be able to safely stand up for themselves.

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*About the Author:*

*Emrie Gilbert grew up in East Tennessee, where he developed a love for the mountains, literature, and the study of sociology. He is currently writing his undergraduate thesis on the Protector of the Small quartet, arguing that the series should be recognized as an important work of Young Adult Fantasy literature. Emrie can be contacted at emgilbert99@gmail.com.*

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