



are doing well, their numbers remaining pretty much steady, probably because, of all the changes are taking place. Seabird colonies are notoriously unstable places. Numbers rise and fall depending on the availability of food; and in the sea that is always unpredictable. This is one reason why seabirds live so long, some species for 50 years, so that they can “ride out” the bad times. It is also why they often have three chicks. In good years all three will get through, while in very bad times none will survive. But natural fluctuations apart, it seems that something else is happening. Most of the birds rely on sand eels for food, particularly the chicks. But it seems that sand-eel numbers around the Scottish coast have dropped dramatically because of fishing and also because of warming seas.

The North Sea has warmed by at least 1°C over the past 25 years, which has affected the distribution of plankton in the water. Plankton is the mainstay of the North Sea ecology and is the food of sand eels. As the cooler waters move north, so do the sand eels, to be replaced in many places by pipe fish. These long, stringy fish are too bulky for young birds to swallow and so in many colonies chicks are starving to death in a nest full of food.

As a Catholic Christian it deeply disturbs me that we are implicated in the changes Bob and others are seeing and that the future is looking increasingly bleak. While there are many passages in Scripture that celebrate the wonder and beauty of the world, as well as the Genesis passage about having dominion over the earth, there is little that makes clear our moral and ethical responsibility for other life.

But I do take heart from the words of St Thomas Aquinas when he said that the *Summa Theologica* was nothing but straw, straw for burning. For no words can truly define mystery; God has to be experienced in our lives for words to begin to have any measure, and that mystery can come close to us through the natural world, a world that reminds us of the words of the Mass: “Father, you are holy indeed, and all creation rightly gives you praise.”

Only by experiencing God in all his wonder will we be moved to act and lead the way towards a sustainable future that respects all life, that does not, for example, destroy breeding grounds of the seabirds of Europe. This weekend in Bristol, Clifton Cathedral will hold an evening birdsong gathering in nearby gardens so that people have time to listen to and identify birds, as well as reflect on nature, before Mass. It is a simple, easy and very special way for a community to be together in the presence of God.

■ Mary Colwell works for the BBC Natural History Unit, Bristol. The birdsong event is at Worcester Terrace Gardens, Bristol (opposite Clifton Cathedral) on Saturday 5 August, at 5 p.m. with Chris Sperring, conservation officer for the Hawk and Owl Trust. It is followed by Mass at 6 p.m.

## PETER STANFORD

# ‘The core messages of Harry Potter’s life are grow up as fast as you can and trust no one’



We didn’t quite manage to queue round the block from our local bookshop to get our hands on *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows* as the clocks struck midnight. And we left it a few days before going to a still-crowded cinema for a showing of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. But I can confidently say that Pottermania has swept our household this week.

I have to admit that Harry P. has never been quite my thing with Kit, 10, and Orla, seven. Their mother has shown saintly patience in reading the books aloud with the two of them. And I have been listening as the three of them have been working their way through the chapters of the new book – albeit sometimes only with half an ear to check out who has died. For those of you who have missed the hype, in this final instalment from J.K. Rowling, one of Harry’s closest chums, if not the boy wizard himself, was rumoured to be going to perish.

Death hangs heavily over the whole Harry Potter series. I came out of the cinema on Saturday evening feeling so profoundly sad for Harry that I began to wonder if it really was all that suitable as entertainment for my children. It wouldn’t require much to present Harry Potter as a victim in a long-running series of tragedies.

Daniel Radcliffe has grown as an actor throughout the series but remains best at showing extremes of emotion. In the new film, his anguish, as Harry, at the death of Sirius Black, the one surviving member of his family who gave a jot about him, had me in tears. This teenage boy has already lost his mother, his father, virtually every teacher who has ever liked him, and (in the books) his beloved headmaster, who gave new meaning to the phrase *in loco parentis*. Adults, to put it briefly, let Harry down one way or another.

In place of family and grown-ups, J.K. Rowling seems to be suggesting that it is Harry’s two chums, Ron and Hermione, who give him the sort of constant emotional support a child needs. But they are children, too. And the dangers Harry is facing

are very much adult ones.

I have written here before about the need to preserve children’s innocence in a world that seems hell-bent on making them grow up into consumers/lovers/geniuses well before their time. J.K. Rowling – for all the childish paraphernalia of wizardry and magic she constructs so dazzlingly – is essentially part of this as well. The core message of Harry’s life is to grow up as fast as you can, do things in place of adults because they’re incapable, and trust no one, certainly not an adult, because they will inevitably let you down. It’s pretty bleak stuff. And somehow pernicious.

Perhaps I am being unduly negative. There is a strong moral message in the Potter books. Harry is a crusader for what is right. He has a strong sense of justice and craves little by way of thanks for his heroism. “It is what is inside that matters,” his godfather, Sirius, tells him in the new film, almost with his last breath.

But the moral message of the books is set very much in the context of a battle between good and evil, darkness and light. The comparisons with the Bible have been laboured. But the picture contains little by way of nuance and, in my admittedly limited experience, children can take on board nuance. Yes, the phenomenal sales of the books would suggest otherwise. And, of course, they are good fun.

But I tend to think that there is no such thing, certainly in a bestselling series of books and films, as just good fun. There’s a message there somewhere which our children digest along with the flying Ford Anglias and polyjuice potions. And despite the many thousands of pages of J.K. Rowling that I’ve heard read and the hours in a cinema watching the films of her books – I’m still not entirely sure what messages she is putting over. In this latest film for instance, the wicked acting-headteacher of Hogwarts, Dolores Umbridge, is part-send-up of Margaret Thatcher, part-lampoon of the New Labour nanny state.

You can, granted, over-analyse children’s books. But when those books are selling hundreds of millions of copies, I can’t help wondering what future social historians looking back on these years will make of the influence of J.K. Rowling on our generation of youngsters. Will she make them more pessimistic, more stoical, less reliant on others? Perhaps. What might that lead to? I don’t know, but it is that inability to pin these books down that makes me most uneasy.