



When Science Editor Roger Highfield was invited to the world's first Harry Potter symposium, he hadn't bargained for one thing – the Quidditch match

# All this magic makes my brain ache

Pictures: STUART CONWAY

Let me explain: I do not consider myself a Harry Potter obsessive. I did write the first book on the science of Potter – and I love JK Rowling's novels. But, as I discovered last weekend, my higher-than-average level of interest barely registers in the hidden world of die-hard Harry Potter fandom. When I was first asked, last December, to be a VIP speaker at Nimbus 2003 in Florida – the world's first grown-up symposium devoted to Harry Potter – the idea seemed a bit of a hoot. It was only after I boarded a plane last Thursday and settled down to read the programme of events that I begin to have misgivings. Among the topics that would be up for discussion were: "The Prisoner of Azkaban: A Case Against the Death Penalty"; "Sexuality, Protest, Elves and White Womanhood"; and "Imperial Harry: Race, JK Rowling and the Post-colonial Context".

At Orlando airport, I am met by Renee Antoine, 23, from Ohio, who is helping the conference's organisers. She works with disturbed teenagers but she is also one of the tens of thousands of Potter devotees who contribute reams of material about their favourite books to the internet every day.

In a van coated in graffiti (such as "Honk if you love Harry Potter"), Antoine drives me and another VIP speaker, Judith Krug, director of the Office of Intellectual Freedom at the American Library Association, to the Swan hotel at Walt Disney World. Nimbus 2003 – named after Potter's top-of-the-range broomstick – has been conceived and developed by "online fandom" – in other words, by the many aficionados and scholars of Harry Potter, who share their views and theories on various websites.

Within the gloomy, air-conditioned interior of the hotel, about 600 people, mostly women in their twenties and thirties – are gathering. Some are dressed in school uniform, many are in academic gowns and quite a few are in full witch regalia, complete with scarves, broomsticks, wands and pointy hats. There are also many home-made T-shirts bearing slogans such as "Chudley Cannons", "What would Draco do?" and "Slytherins are sexy".

Delegates have flown in from all over America, from Britain, Australia, India and the Philippines. The ones I meet divide between Star Trek-style obsessives, "net heads" with names such as Lilac, Mariner and Caius Marcius, and dry-as-dust academics (the speakers).

Scheduled stunts at the four-day event include an auction of a blue Ford Anglia and a vote to find the world's official merchandise – a close-run thing between Harry underpants and a Troll bogey glue-gun. But there are also serious matters to be discussed.

Once initiated into the Potter coven and handed my name tag, I am greeted by Penny Linsenmayer, a Houston lawyer and one of Nimbus's organisers. Linsenmayer runs a "shipping" website (hers explores the relationship – "ship" – between Harry and Hermione) and she is here to deliver a paper on the geography of the Potter world. Not just the easy stuff, such as the location of Privet Drive, but the detail that appeals to the true obsessives: notably the site of Godric's Hollow, where Harry's parents were killed – it's somewhere in either Wales, Cornwall or the West Country, she says. "It's going to be a controversial lecture," she warns.

In search of light relief, I check out some of the merchandise on offer in a room called "Kumpulsieve Alley". Thankfully, there is relatively little mass-marketed Potter junk. Instead, the stalls are overflowing with capes, waistcoats, jewellery and floppy hats.

I drop in on two magic wand manufacturers. "Alivan's" is run by Dave Wedzik, whose prices range from \$35 for a basic model and up to \$65 for a customised ebony version. "We have had the occasional person ringing to say: 'My wand does not work,'" says Wedzik. As for phoenix feathers: "It has been difficult to find them lately. But we get calls about those, too."

Alivan's biggest rival is a company called Whirlwood, which specialises in "Dumbledore's ceremonial wand" – a



**A lone suit in the Potter coven: Highfield was joined in Florida by delegates from all over the world, who seemed to divide between 'Star Trek-style obsessives, and dry-as-dust academics'**

\$300 affair complete with brass handle. For those on tight budgets, there are free "Barbie wands" which, to my untrained eye, appear to be toothpicks.

Later, I bump into a fellow Brit: Susan Hall, a property lawyer from Manchester, who says she was sucked into the "Potterverse" when she began to exchange e-mails on "magical law" with another lawyer in Florida. When I ask about the paper she is to deliver on justice in the wizarding world, she launches into a detailed account of how wizard and Muggle law were closely linked before 1692 and the introduction of the Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, when they began to diverge.

She adores the Potter books, but admits to being vexed by an incident in the latest – *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (referred to by everyone here as the Big Book) – in which Harry is tried in a criminal court, with no adult or even legal representation. "It is a textbook example of bad legal practice," Hall complains. What do her colleagues in Manchester think? She winces, so one assumes that not all of her peers share her enthusiasm.

The first day of activities ends with an *Ode to Harry Potter*, sung by a Californian "acoustic punk" group called the Switchblade Kittens. Perhaps all those flowing robes have left me giddy, but I find myself being talked into playing a game of Quidditch the following day. What have I let myself in for?

At 6 am, the phone rings. "Have a magical day," intones the automated wake-up call. In the hall where my lecture is about to take place, I find a great crowd eager to find out whether we can create three-headed giant dogs, become invisible or whizz around a network of fireplaces with the help of floor powder. (The answer to all of these questions is yes-ish, thanks to genetic modification, adaptive camouflage and quantum teleportation.) A correspondent from *Time* magazine



has turned up to listen to my talk, along with a woman from the *Orlando Sentinel* – not to mention several of my academic peers and a teenager who keeps asking questions about ghosts. But the costumed brigade – the die-hard fans in pointy hats – seems to have given my talk a miss. When I approach a Draco Malfoy afterwards, it soon becomes clear that even Potterites have their own narrow specialisms.

"I've got the blonde hair and I just love Draco," declares Kayla Georgiann, a 19-year-old writer of "fan fiction" – the Potter-based tomes posted on websites by fans who aren't prepared to wait three years for another book. She is keenly awaiting a session entitled "Draco redeemed". "I rewrote *The Philosopher's Stone* from Draco's point of view, and I made a lot of people sympathetic to him by doing that."

After lunch, I notice that hundreds are gathering outside the Great Hall. I slip inside, a lone suit among the costumes, and find a bespectacled British ex-public schoolboy explaining to the uninitiated what neatheds refer to as the "slash genre". His definition? "Romantic relationships between

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members of the same sex who are not in an explicitly stated relationship within an opus." A fellow panellist, Dave Wang, a mathematics teacher from Delaware, assures the whooping throng that "Draco wants Harry". But there is no accounting for tastes: slash, I am told, is mostly enjoyed by heterosexual women. Dr Bridget Cowlshaw, a teacher at Florida Atlantic University, tells the meeting that she is particularly taken by the Snape/Harry dynamic, which "subverts the patriarchal system".

In the more academic lectures, other teachers are pondering whether the books follow the Gothic tradition or whether they are influenced by Jane Austen or Stoic philosophy. Dr Philip Nel, of Kansas State University, deconstructs A S Byatt's attack on *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* while Dr Alice Trupe, who teaches creative writing, points out that, like many other fictional characters, Harry "is severely constrained by a history of which he is largely ignorant, replete with class prejudices, racism, economic disparity and exploitation".

My brain is beginning to ache. A

lecturer called Sidharth Jaggi tries to tell me about "ontological displacements" in the books (something to do with Platform 9 3/4), while John Granger, author of *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter* and the only bona fide Potter professor (from the online Barnes and Noble University), explains how the books "offer initiation, not into the occult, but rather into the symbolist world view of revealed faiths and the dominant symbols and doctrines of traditional Christianity".

Elsewhere, literature graduate Emily Anderson is arguing that Hermione's bossiness and bravery reveal masculine traits, while Harry "displays more qualities traditionally associated with feminism". By making Harry the undisputed hero, she adds, "Rowling is celebrating femininity, depicting female power as overpowering male power, even if that female power is embodied in a male character". Then, Amy Miller tries to convince me that there are Jewish teachings in the Potter books, as well as "parallels to Hitler, genocide and racism". Enough!

And now – there is no avoiding it – the Quidditch tournament is upon us. At 6 pm, and feeling somewhat queasy, I join a noisy throng in a ballroom where six hoops have been erected, three at each end. This is, I am told later, the biggest ever Muggle Quidditch match. As a "beater" with the Cape Canaveral Kestrels – one of two in each team armed with rubberised bats – my job is to defend the team from "bludgers" and whack them at our opponents.

The evening's MC, Chris Dickson, a mathematics graduate from Oxford, takes an age to explain the rules. Then, the first match begins – and appears to last for ever. It seems to be a combination of three different games all taking place at once: a glorified version of basketball (played by chasers with a red "quaffle" instead of a ball); a hunt

by a "seeker" (for a little yellow ball called a "golden snitch", which brings instant victory); and, finally, a target competition (the beaters try to whack black balls at rival players to knock them out of action for 10 seconds).

My team-mates are unimpressed when I explain that I have always been hopeless at ball games. I had forgotten how seriously Americans take their sport – we have even been asked to sign a waiver so that we cannot sue the organisers if a bludger breaks an arm, or a snitch takes someone's eye out.

By now, we have lost one member of our team. Liz O'Reilly, of Hull University, decides that she would rather mug up on her forthcoming talk on "Perceptions of Childhood and Adult Child Relations in Harry Potter" than chase little balls around.

Morale is low, and our opponents, the Miami McCaws, look as though they mean business. Among them is Draco (Kayla Georgiann), who leers at me in character. As the game begins, I stumble about and swing at the ball ineffectually; when I do connect with the bludger, I am told off by the referee for hitting it too hard.

I reckon that I have now hit my own team more often than the enemy. Then, incredibly, our seeker, 14-year-old Sara Pierce, grabs a snitch. After a confused pause, I find – much to my amazement – that we have won.

Draco shakes her fist at me menacingly from the sidelines as we play the Orlando Ospreys in the final. Three minutes later, Sara does it again, and the Kestrels do a little victory dance. Honour preserved, we leave the hall in high spirits. The MC turns to give me his verdict on our victory: "It's been a fairytale ending". Indeed, it has.

The Science of Harry Potter by Roger Highfield (Headline) is available for £6.99 plus £2.25 p&p. To order, call Telegraph Books Direct on 0870 155 7222

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