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Mixing Memory and Desire
Recollecting the Self in *Harry Potter* and
His Dark Materials

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Abstract

Just as memory pervades our everyday lives, it pervades the lives of the characters and readers of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Acts of recall or recollection occur in almost every chapter as the characters in these novels devote much of the present to keeping in touch with some aspect of the past. Memory is integral to *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*, highlighting the following problematic questions: Who are we and how do we relate to the past? How is what we wish for the future grounded in the past and the present?

Memory is at the core of constructivism, the active construction of reality by the individual through the use of mental activity. In this thesis I maintain that the central protagonists in *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*, Harry Potter and Lyra Belacqua, actively construct their 'selves' from memories and narratives – their own and those of others – just as the novels' readers negotiate their own identities in the world outside of the novels. The constant recalling of the past to confirm and amply one's present creates a complex web of remembering and forgetting, assimilating and discarding, which we attempt to explicate through the use of culturally appropriate metaphors.

The thesis comprises three chapters that correlate memory with genre, narrative, and technology respectively. I commence the thesis by exploring the idea of genre as collective memory. I position *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* within the genre of heroic fantasy and examine how the monomyth provides readers with the memory triggers they require to decode the structure of these texts. The novels conform to and yet manipulate the preconceived patterns present in the heroic or 'high' fantasy genre, where narrative, memory and identity are all linked by the desires of the stories' participants. Chapter Two applies Freud's concept of *Nachtraglichkeit*, which supposes the process of memory is one of incessant reconsideration or 'retranslation', the reworking of memory traces in the light of later knowledge and experience. This conceptualisation of memory is compared to the common, but less productive, tendency to describe memory through objectifying metaphors, such as the idea that memory works analogously to a photograph. Chapter Three addresses how knowledge and experience in *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* are furnished by prosthetic memory devices, such as photographs, the Pensieve, the alethiometer and the Amber Spyglass, "that permit us to transcend 'raw' biological limits – for example, the limits on memory

capacity or limits on our auditory range” (Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* 34). The novel’s protagonists are then armed with these devices in trying to make sense of the landscapes they inhabit.

Ultimately, we are all story-tellers (for better or for worse), weaving our self-narratives from material gleaned from the collective memories and prosthetic memory devices of the society we belong to, our own experiences, and the tales of others, trying to achieve the uniformity of consciousness and an awareness of the connection between the actions and events of the past, and the experience of the present, which are fundamental to a sense of individual identity.

Acknowledgements

When asked about the time-consuming nature of his archive project, Canadian singer Neil Young responded with: “When I do finally get it out there, it’s going to be a great relief. ... It’s like a huge overcoat that I wear. It’s got a lot of pockets in it. Some of them are full of diamonds. Some of them are just full of lead. It’s a burden, but it’s getting lighter” (qtd. in Pareles). While it would be grossly exaggerating to say that this project has reached the proportions of Young’s body of works, I can certainly relate to the relief that it is finally finished and the fact that I can stop sorting through my ‘pockets’ all the time looking for diamonds.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
Mixing Memory and Desire.....	4
Theoretical Methodology.....	7
Structure of the Thesis	11
Chapter One: Remembering Heroic Fantasy	15
Fantasy and Fantastic Fiction	19
The Heroic Monomyth.....	24
The Creation of a Hero	36
A ‘More Suitable’ Myth	47
Chapter Two: Memory, Narrative, Identity	49
The Photographic Metaphor of Memory	55
Nachträglichkeit and Narrative.....	59
Narrative Construction of Reality.....	65
The Power of the Past	73
Chapter Three: Memory, Desire and Prosthetic Devices	75
The Photograph.....	77
The Pensieve	85
The Alethiometer and Amber Spyglass	90
Prosthetic Devices and the Truth	96
Conclusion	99
Works Cited and Consulted	103

The *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* books referred to in this thesis are frequently abbreviated in parenthetical references as follows:

<i>PS</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone: Book One</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets: Book Two</i>
<i>PA</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban: Book Three</i>
<i>GF</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire: Book Four</i>
<i>OP</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix: Book Five</i>
<i>HBP</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince: Book Six</i>
<i>DH</i>	<i>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Book Seven</i>
<i>NL</i>	<i>Northern Lights: His Dark Materials, Book One</i>
<i>SK</i>	<i>The Subtle Knife: His Dark Materials, Book Two</i>
<i>AS</i>	<i>The Amber Spyglass: His Dark Materials, Book Three</i>