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Potter phenomenon boosts learning

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The Harry Potter series, which culminates tomorrow in the release of the seventh title Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, is boosting children's interest in reading and stimulating learning, experts say.

Writing teacher Dr Lisa Emerson, a senior lecturer in the School of English and Media Studies, says the Potter series is a remarkable phenomenon.

"The fact that we have children desperately longing for a book to come out and speculation about its plot is very encouraging in that children are looking at books differently," Dr Emerson says. "Probably the only comparable literary event is when [Charles] Dickens was writing in the 19th century and people used to wait for the next edition to come off the boats. Harry Potter is a one in a hundred years phenomenon."

Dr Emerson says that while the books are not great works of literature, they are very clever and well-written children's books.

"Also the books have changed genre. The early books were school stories with a twist but they have now moved into fantasy, which is quite amazing. They have integrity – they work brilliantly from one to the next and it takes considerable skill to be able to achieve that. Some are better than others of course but I do think we'll still be reading them in years to come."

Senior lecturer in the College of Education Brian Finch is writing his doctoral thesis on educational value of watching video, using the second volume in the series, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.

He says that while it is encouraging that Potter has made reading a valued activity by children, watching movies also has educational benefits.

"When children engage with film they know lots of detail about the dialogues, the characters and they are immersed in the action. They have a very good depth of knowledge of the stories, so that too shows valuable learning."

Many of the nine and 10-year-olds he interviewed had read and re-read the second book, and watched the movie many times.

"Harry as a hero is very attractive, he is not a superhero and like us, he's not top of the class or the best at ordinary things but he has these unusual talents we would like to have. Kids identify with him."

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows will be on sale from 11.01am tomorrow, with plot teasers on websites suggesting that Harry has been burdened with a dark, dangerous and seemingly impossible task: that of

locating and destroying Voldemort's remaining Horcuxes.

The first of the seven Harry Potter books, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, was published in 1996. Sales of more than 300 million books have earned British author JK Rowling billions.

Source: Massey University

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