

Carry On: A Parody of the Harry Potter Series

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Introduction

Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On* (2015) plays on popular fantasy genre conventions to parody J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and comments on the "chosen one" trope, the plot, characters, and relationships. The story follows Simon Snow, the "worst Chosen One who's ever been chosen" (Rowell, *passim*), as he enters his final year at the Watford School of Magicks. As the Chosen One, he faces pressure to save the World of Mages from the Insidious Humdrum, a mysterious force that has been stealing magic from the world. At the same time, he must navigate a difficult relationship with his roommate, Baz. Alongside his friends and Baz, Simon embarks on a quest to solve a murder, which ultimately uncovers decades-old treason and the novel ends with Simon sacrificing his magic to defeat the Insidious Humdrum.²¹

While many reviewers from platforms such as *Goodreads* recognize *Carry On*'s similarities to the *Harry Potter* series, not everyone perceives them to be intentional, as some simply believe the "book definitely [had] elements that were similar to other stories" (*Goodreads*, JesseTheReader). Despite this, Rowell has stated in an interview with *The Guardian* that the similarities are intentional: "When I'm referencing *Harry Potter* and other Chosen Ones in *Carry On*, I'm doing it very intentionally. I'm talking to the reader directly in those moments: 'You've read the same books that I've read. You love the same stories. Let's talk about them. Let's think about them. Let's take them apart and see what's inside'" (quoted in Sproull). As such, Rowell not only confirms that the similarities are meant to be there, but also indirectly claims that *Carry On* is a parody meant to say something about the *Harry Potter* series. Since not all readers perceive the novel as a parody, it is important firstly to determine whether *Carry On* truly is one, and secondly how that impacts our understanding of the story.

²¹ The characters of Simon and Baz first made an appearance in Rowell's *Fangirl* (2013) as characters in the protagonist's fanfiction of the fictitious "Simon Snow" series. From there, Rowell developed these characters into a separate novel. Although an argument that *Fangirl* is a parody of slash fanfiction can be made, it is outside the scope of the present essay.

Theoretical Framework

Linda Hutcheon's seminal work *A Theory of Parody* (1985) remains one of the most influential in the field. Hutcheon rejects the notion that parodies exist simply to mock their background texts, and claims that they are instead "a form of inter-art discourse" (2). She states that parodies are analytical and interpretive in nature, serving to comment on culture and ideology. They are distinct from other modes such as pastiche and burlesque, with which they are often confounded. Hutcheon asserts that ironic trans-contextualization is what defines and gives a unique power to parody (12). Trans-contextualization is a process through which parodies shift the settings of their target works. This shift demonstrates how a work's meaning can be altered when put into new cultural or historical contexts, allowing dynamic interactions between works that enables us not only to "come to terms with the weight of the past" (29), but also to look forward with "transformative power" (20) that creates new cultural meaning. Hutcheon claims that parody is "repetition with difference," where "critical distance is implied between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony" (32). The reader plays a key role in the interpretation of the text. If the reader is unable to recognize the incorporating work as a parody, they take the message at face value and simply integrate it into their understanding of the work. Using a Goodreads review as an example, although "Khahn, first of her name, mother of bunnies" did notice similarities between certain aspects of *Carry On* and other stories, she ultimately perceived the novel to be its own piece of literature. Hutcheon states that parodies operate on two levels, one surface and one that is implied, and because of this "the final meaning of irony of parody rests on the recognition of the superimposition of these levels" (34). The reader must therefore be able to understand the interplay of these levels to recognize and understand a parodic work. Overall, for a work to be considered a parody, it must 1) contain similarities to the background text, 2) contain differences from it, and 3) be perceived as a parody by its audience. According to Hutcheon's theory, *Carry On* is indeed a parody because it contains ironic subversions of tropes, plot, and characters present in the *Harry Potter* series to create a more nuanced understanding of the story.

Similarities

Not unlike Hutcheon's claims about the importance of similarities, Jonathan Gray argues that for the reader to understand which background text is being parodied, "ghost" textuality must be created (Gray 45). By that he means that the

parody must establish similarities with the background text “invisibly, yet hopefully still sensed by its audience” (45). This does not mean that these links must be subtle, only that they have to be there. The use of fantasy setting and elements in Rowell’s work creates a powerful sense of familiarity. *Carry On* takes place at Watford Wizarding School of Magicks, a British boarding school where students come to learn magic. Additionally, each student is assigned a roommate by the Crucible, an old magical relic that casts people together (Rowell 168). Once matched with your roommate, all eight years of school are spent sharing a room. There is a stark similarity to Hogwarts, also a magical British boarding school, the only difference being that its students are sorted into one of four “houses” by a sentient hat.²² *Carry On* also includes magical creatures and artifacts, including merwolves (wolf mermaids) and items (such as wands and rings) used to channel magic when casting spells, reminiscent of the *Harry Potter* series. These similarities create a superficial sense of familiarity for the reader and are likely to be the similarities noticed.

The second main similarity is both authors’ use of the “Chosen One” trope; however, as will be discussed later, one of the major differences that establish *Carry On* as a parody is Rowell’s subversion of the trope. The Chosen One is a character chosen, oftentimes by a prophecy, destiny, or some sort of divine power, to be the hero who saves the world from an evil villain (Gobert Tilahun). The character usually leads a mundane life before discovering they have secret powers, at which point they begin the hero’s journey. At the age of eleven, after living a relatively normal life as an orphan in a care home, Simon finds out he has magic and slays a dragon supposedly sent by the Humdrum to kill him (Rowell 5). He then finds out that he is the most powerful mage in the world and that he was foretold in a prophecy as the “greatest power of all powers” that would come when the World of Mages was in danger to defeat a great threat (Rowell 34). Rowell establishes that, before the events that take place in *Carry On*, Simon and his friends have had several battles with creatures sent by the Humdrum to destroy him. Likewise, as early as Chapter 1 of *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, Professor McGonagall states that Harry will one day be a “legend” and that “there will be books written about Harry – every child in our world will know his name” (Rowling SS 13). Upon being introduced to the magical world, Harry learns that

²² It is worth mentioning that Rowling uses many conventional fantasy genre tropes in her series. Battles between good and evil, Chosen Ones, magical boarding schools, mythical creatures, and magical tools are common tropes and themes used in many other stories (Brewer). However, the *Harry Potter* series is not a parody of any other fantasy work since Rowling does not commit any ironic inversions.

Voldemort allegedly died the night he tried to murder Harry (55–57). As the story progresses, Voldemort and his followers once again rise to power and threaten the magical world. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry finds out that a prophecy marked him as “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord” (Rowling *OP* 841). Harry and his friends also have several run-ins with the powers of evil, as every book in the series culminates with a showdown between Harry and Voldemort or one of his followers.

Rowell’s use of similar fantasy genre elements and the “Chosen One” trope have a dual purpose. Firstly, as Hutcheon states, parody is “imitation characterized by ironic inversion” (6). Upon setting up these similarities, Rowell begins subverting them to bring the reader’s attention to particular areas of *Harry Potter* she finds outdated, as I discuss below. Secondly, according to Gray, “each genre has its own ‘common sense’ rules,” that we “internalize and use to make sense of future texts,” (28). Thus, while reading *Carry On*, readers can now use their knowledge of other “Chosen One” stories, including the *Harry Potter* series, to make predictions of where the story will go. Based on this, readers would expect Simon eventually to defeat the Humdrum, become the hero he was prophesied to be, find his one true love, and get a happy ending. However, through ironic inversion, the story does not progress in the expected way.

Beyond Simon/Harry, Rowell also creates other intentionally similar characters. Simon’s friend Penny is a smart and strong witch, much like Hermione. There are several instances in the book where her magical skills prove essential in battle against the Humdrum. During the battle at the end of the novel, she is the one who casts the spell that defeats the Mage (Rowell 486). In the *Harry Potter* series, Hermione is known as the smart one in the trio and is often the one to figure things out during conflicts, such as when she recognizes the plant trapping the trio at the end of *The Sorcerer’s Stone* as the Devil’s Snare, and subsequently saves them by lighting a fire to fight it (Rowling *SS* 278). Baz’s character bears a resemblance to Draco. Each is a bully, rival, and general antagonist. The relationships between Simon and Baz and Harry and Draco are initially complicated by the divide among their families, as both Baz and Draco come from old and powerful families with more conservative and elitist opinions on how the magical world should operate. *Carry On* establishes a history of antagonism between Simon and Baz: Baz setting a chimera on Simon to get him killed (169), the two of them getting into physical altercations several times a year (167), and Baz’s attempt to steal Simon’s voice, thereby stealing his ability to

practice magic (180). Setting up such a deep-rooted dislike between Simon and Baz allows Rowell to create tension like the one between Harry and Draco.

Differences

As Rowell says in the interview with *The Guardian*, the similarities between *Carry On* and the *Harry Potter* series are deliberate and meant to create conversation with the reader. At the heart of the similarities, there are also differences with Hutcheon's critical distance. Rowell first breaks down the "Chosen One" trope to modernize it, as well as to point out how much the *Harry Potter* series leans on it to get the story in motion. Hutcheon claims that parody can be a "conservative force in both retaining and mocking other aesthetic forms; but it is also capable of transformative power in creating new syntheses" (20). We can see this in Rowell's manipulation of the "Chosen One" trope, in particular through the subversion of Simon's character in relation to Harry's. Rowell criticizes Rowling's use of a teenager still learning to control his powers being the one who defeats Voldemort as a plot device that advances the story. Unlike Harry, who is always a talented magician, Simon is unskilled. From the first few chapters, the reader learns that Simon would rather use a sword than magic on his enemies: first, from his memory of fighting a chimera, then when a goblin attacks him while he is on his way to Watford, and he uses the sword to kill him. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that although Simon is the most powerful magician who has ever existed, he is bad at wielding his magic. After the goblin attack, he tries to clear away any evidence, and at first his wand only sparks, then "the taxi disappears. And the head disappears. And the fence disappears. And the road..." (Rowell 24-5). The same pattern of Simon's spells not working as intended, often having disastrous effects, continues until the end of the book. His magic is consistently unstable and uncontrollable. It is ironic that the character who is expected to save the world can hardly control his powers. Although Rowell employs "conservative force," as Hutcheon calls it, mocking the idea of a perfectly talented young magician destined for greatness by using a character with the opposite qualities, she also creates "new syntheses" by modifying the traditional hero's journey Simon goes through. Instead of focusing on battling evil, Simon often struggles with insecurity about his skills, causing him to doubt his ability to defeat the Humdrum. He develops alternative skills, such as his swordsmanship and his ability to "go off" (7), which puts a new spin on traditional "Chosen One" stories such as the *Harry Potter* series. All in all, Rowell offers new ways to incorporate the "Chosen One" trope, or even to bypass it altogether.

She takes the irony one step further by mocking the power given to prophecies in both stories. Although both are arbitrary, in that neither of them mention Simon or Harry by name, in both stories circumstances push the boys towards the roles described in them. The prophecy in *Carry On* is also extremely vague, not specifying what the threat to magic will be: “And one will come to end us all,” or who would be the savior, “And one will bring his fall” (34). It then becomes clear how absurd assigning the role of the Chosen One to Simon is, given his lack of control.

By committing these ironic inversions, Rowell is affecting the commonsense rules as Gray describes them. Throughout the novel, Rowell subverts the “Chosen One” trope, which according to Gray would come as a surprise to the reader since they would expect the story to develop more like it does in the Harry Potter series. Gray says that, while reading, the audience makes guesses as to what will happen. These guesses are eventually proven right or wrong. He calls this process “reading through” (33) because while reading, we are not only reading the text itself, but also reading it through other texts. In this case, while reading *Carry On*, the reader would also read it through the *Harry Potter* series (and/or through other novels featuring the “Chosen One” trope). This process is important, as Gray goes on to say that the interactions between the texts are multidirectional, and *Carry On* as a parody, “threatens to destabilize... [the *Harry Potter* series] power,” (45). In other words, while reading *Carry On*, the audience’s understanding of the *Harry Potter* series also changes.

Although several characters, such as Simon and Penny, are parodies of their *Harry Potter* counterparts, Baz, in relation to Draco, is by far the most developed and subverted. Although prior to the events of *Carry On* and at the start of the novel, Baz is bad, soon after his arrival at school, the reader finds out through that he is “hopelessly in love with [Simon]” (Rowell 176). Even before this confession, he shows signs of not being as evil as he outwardly presents himself to be. For instance, during class when he notices Simon getting so upset by his presence that he begins losing control of his magic, Baz imagines helping him calm down (161). The reader also learns that although he does harbour hate towards Simon, he has long since stopped trying to inflict long-lasting damage following an incident during which an innocent bystander got severely hurt (181). As the story progresses, Baz joins forces with Simon and his friends to solve the murder of his mother, and eventually participates in the uncovering of the Mage’s betrayal and subsequent defeat of the Insidious Humdrum. A significant portion of *Carry On* is written from his point of view, and as a result his character is very complex and

developed. Overall, by making him one of the main characters and giving insight into his thoughts, Rowell humanizes him and gives him a redemption arc. His character was such a success that he prompted Rowell to write a sequel to *Carry On* continuing Baz's story. She shared in an interview with *Vox* that, after finishing *Carry On*, "the back of my mind just never leaves Baz Pitch... He just is there all the time." Rowell is not the only one who loves Baz this much, as many reviewers pick Baz as their favourite character. For example, Hannah Azerang on *Goodreads* says, "Don't even get me started on my love for Baz because I'll never stop." This is in contrast to Draco, who remains a secondary villain throughout the *Harry Potter* series, and no sort of positive relationship ever develops between him and Harry in Rowling's novels. This glaring difference between the roles of Baz and Draco in their respective novels begs the question of why Rowell decided to parody the character of Draco by turning him into Baz, a fan favourite character secretly in love with his nemesis. Based on Rowell's statement that the similarities between *Carry On* and the *Harry Potter* series are attempts at communication with the readers, one potential reason is Draco's popularity among fans. A quick google search reveals endless blogs, discussion threads, fan art and even an entire subreddit dedicated to him. Comments under a *Reddit* post asking why fans love Draco despite his bad portrayal in the books reveal that "a lot of people wanted to see him have some sort of redemption arc" and "He is an extremely popular character in fanon, not canon. There is basically the canon version of him that exists in the books/movies and there is the fanon version of him that exists in fandom/fanfic/head-canon/etc. You basically got to treat them like two different characters" ("Mountain_Pathfinder" & "HauntedReader"). Based on the fanfiction written about Draco on *Archive of Our Own*, these commenters are right, as many stories depict him as quite similar to Baz. For instance, a fanfiction titled "Storm in a Teacup" depicts Draco's secret obsession with Harry's hair, and unexpected friendship between the two, and the eventual formation of a romantic relationship (Wood). While the story alludes to the fact that Draco is still considered mean, he is also given several good qualities like a sense of humour, supportiveness, and a general "fluffy" outlook on the world. Baz aligns more with the fandom-created version of Draco than the version that Rowling describes in the *Harry Potter* series. Rowell may not so much have been parodying Rowling's depiction of Draco, but reader perceptions of him by trans-contextualizing him from the fandom space to her novel, where she creates an alternative version of the *Harry Potter* series in which Draco becomes good and gets the much-desired redemption arc. The irony in this difference is

that it creates more interesting and nuanced interactions between Simon and Baz and elevates the story.

Rowell also further plays on popular reader conceptions of Draco in the fandom by queering both Baz and Simon and developing a romantic relationship between the two. A search of fanfics under the “Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter” tag on *Archive of Our Own* gives nearly 70,000 results, demonstrating the popularity and desire of the Harry Potter fans to see a relationship between the two characters. This desire is not lost on Rowell, as we could argue that Simon and Baz’s relationship reads like a parody aimed at critiquing the lack of sexual orientation diversity in the *Harry Potter* series. By adding this relationship, Rowell critiques several of Rowling’s choices. Firstly, she brings the reader’s attention to the lack of Queer representation in the *Harry Potter* series, as no outwardly Queer characters are included. Secondly, Rowell criticizes the notion that Harry, as the Chosen One and a typical fantasy hero, has to end up in a heterosexual relationship. Instead, she creates an alternative narrative in which Simon does not “magically” develop feelings for a convenient female-presenting character, such as Ginny in the *Harry Potter* series, but instead enters a complicated relationship with a man. By doing this, she improves the story and communicates to the reader that, much like them, she also found the lack of Queer representation and of well-developed romance plots problematic. As such, she subverts the idea that Agatha, whom Simon dated for several years prior to the events of *Carry On*, should have been his main love interest by introducing a Queer relationship with Baz. In *Carry On*, Rowell notices Draco’s missed potential and brings to life the “what-if” scenarios that many fans of the *Harry Potter* series want. I feel that Rowell’s portrayal of Baz is more a respectful homage of the Draco/Harry fanfiction than a parody.

Reader Perceptions

Not all readers see *Carry On* as a parody, and the reviews of those who do demonstrate mixed opinions on whether *Carry On* as a parody of the *Harry Potter* series elevates or ruins the narrative, with one reviewer from *Goodreads* saying, “it is all sorts of ludicrous to read a book about a character who is a parody of another character” (*Goodreads*, Khanh first of her name mother of bunnies). Another reviewer said that the *Harry Potter* series’ heavy prominence was “not really satisfying,” meaning the novel would have been better off as a stand-alone rather than a parody (*Goodreads*, Chantal). On the other hand, many reviewers also appreciated *Carry On* for how it subverted the *Harry Potter* series. For

example, a reviewer by the username of “chan” says “I think I like this better than *Harry Potter*... this book does SUCH a good job at pointing out issues in the source material.” Another reviewer stated that “[*Carry On*] is everything that never would have happened in *Harry Potter*” (*Goodreads*, Kristina Horner). Although these (and other reviewers) do not elaborate on why specifically they think that *Carry On* is a parody, based on what they do say, it seems as though Rowell makes unexpected but welcome changes that readers wanted (but did not get) from the *Harry Potter* series. “emma” says that this book is for readers who “always wanted Harry and Draco to date but in a world in which Draco isn’t a total sh*tbag and doesn’t require so much over explanation.” Another user points out that Rowell’s subversion of the “Chosen One” trope was “brilliant,” “clever,” and “witty” (*Goodreads*).

Besides either loving or hating *Carry On* as a parody, many readers are also divided on whether the novel exists simply within the frame of the *Harry Potter* series or if it can also be read as a “standalone.” One *Goodreads* reviewer with the username “Jesse (JesseTheReader)” says “While the book definitely had elements that were similar to other stories, it had its own refreshing style.” Another says that *Carry On* did not feel like a copy of the *Harry Potter* series, as Rowell created “[her] own world” (*Goodreads*, Natalie). To put it differently, even those who recognize the intentional similarities and differences between *Carry On* and the *Harry Potter* series ultimately think that Rowell’s parody ultimately creates a unique piece of literature, improving on the shortcomings of the *Harry Potter* series, but also of other similar fantasy stories. As novelist Charles De Lint says in his review of *Carry On*, “A third of the way into the book the reader entirely forgets the influences. Instead, they’re drawn into a world as absorbing and magical as *Harry Potter*’s (and to be honest, with better writing), and are engaged with these characters and this story” (81). All in all, it seems as though Rowell’s purpose while writing *Carry On* is not only to point out and critique certain aspects of Rowling’s novels that readers and she found problematic, she also ends up writing an original story that subverts common fantasy tropes, and the result is somewhere between a parody and an original story. This makes sense when we take the sequels *Wayward Son* (2019) and *Any Way the Wind Blows* (2021) into consideration, as Rowell diverges from the *Harry Potter* narrative and takes the story and its characters into a completely new direction.

Conclusion

To the question of whether *Carry On* is a parody at all, using Hutcheon’s definition, the answer would be “yes.” Rowell successfully establishes similarities

and differences with the *Harry Potter* series, and, more importantly, the differences are done at a critical distance that allows her to comment on the plot, trope usage, and characters. Ultimately, having the knowledge that *Carry On* is a parody of the *Harry Potter* series should prompt readers to re-evaluate their conceptions of the popular series, and perhaps consider Rowell's work to be a more nuanced and better-written piece of literature.

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Acknowledgments

I want to thank Professor Didicher and all my classmates from ENGL417W who helped me write and edit my essay.



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