



Illustration of an alchemy workshop
Johann Mylius, *Opus Medico-Chymicum*, 1618

IN 1997, BRITISH AUTHOR J. K. ROWLING INTRODUCED THE WORLD TO HARRY POTTER AND A LITERARY PHENOMENON WAS BORN. Millions of readers have followed Harry to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry where he discovers his heritage, encounters new plants and animals, and perfects his magical abilities. Although a fantasy story, the magic in the Harry Potter books is partially based on Renaissance traditions that played an important role in the development of Western science, including alchemy, astrology, and natural philosophy. Incorporating the work of several 15th- and 16th-century thinkers, the seven-part series explores important ethical topics during Harry's attempts to defeat the villainous Lord Voldemort, such as the desire for knowledge, the effects of prejudice, and the responsibility that comes with power.



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RENAISSANCE SCIENCE, MAGIC, AND MEDICINE IN HARRY POTTER'S WORLD



Illustration of an owl
Konrad Gesner, *Historiae Animalium*, 1551



Hortus Sanitatis, 1491

Nicolas Flamel, *La Metallique Transformation*, 1618

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De Occulta Philosophia*, 1533

“Instead of roots, a small, muddy, and extremely ugly baby popped out of the earth. The leaves were growing right out of his head. He had pale green, mottled skin, and was clearly bawling at the top of his lungs.”

—Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, J. K. Rowling



Detail from illustration of a female mandrake root
Hortus Sanitatis, 1491

DE DRACONE

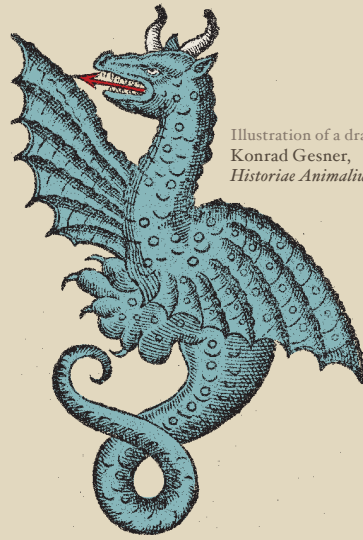


Illustration of a dragon
Konrad Gesner,
Historiae Animalium, 1551

At Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry not only learns magic spells, charms, and potions, he is also taught about the natural world and its many uses. The young wizard’s knowledge and appreciation of plants and animals, such as mandrakes, basilisks, and dragons, ultimately helps him end Lord Voldemort’s violent reign.

“We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward.”

—Albus Dumbledore to Harry Potter,
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, J. K. Rowling

Although the wizards of *Harry Potter* value learning and teaching about the world around them, they do not always respect the creatures in it. Merpeople and centaurs, known in the series as “half-breeds,” are forced to live on segregated lands and are subject to laws in which they have no say. Several of Harry’s mentors are bothered by the inequalities forced on these creatures and try to instill in the young wizard the value of respecting all magical beings.



Detail of a centaur from an illustration of the human body and the astrological signs that govern it
Joannes de Ketham,
Fasciculus de Medicina, 1493/1494

“It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”

—Albus Dumbledore,
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, J. K. Rowling

Throughout the seven-book series, Harry Potter makes crucial decisions about the fate of all living things as he attempts to thwart the villainous Lord Voldemort’s unending quest for a racially-pure wizard state, ultimate power, and eternal life. Time and again, the young wizard sets himself apart from Voldemort by choosing to appreciate the natural world, respect all magical creatures, and use his power to help others, even at the risk of his own life. Harry’s desire to do what is right helps him to defeat Lord Voldemort, keeping all the young wizard loves safe from harm.



The Workes of Ambrose Parey,
translated out of Latine, 1634

Like Harry’s professors, many Renaissance thinkers valued the study of the natural world. For example, both the naturalist Konrad Gesner and the surgeon Ambroise Paré argued that knowing more about the living things around them would help them to better understand the way the world worked. Their publications often catalogued the traits and medicinal value of odd creatures, including some featured hundreds of years later in *Harry Potter*.



Paracelsus, *Aurei Velleris oder der Guldin Schatz und Kunstkammer*, 1598

During the Renaissance, the 16th-century physician and alchemist Paracelsus was unique to his profession for his appreciation of what other cultures could teach about healing. During his countless travels, he sought advice from diverse sources, including barbers and wise women. Paracelsus also held the unorthodox views that medical treatment should be a basic right and that nature should be protected, not exploited.

“All things that we use on earth let us use them for good and not for evil.”

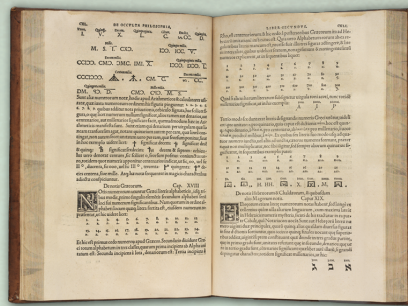
—Paracelsus, *De Religione Perpetua*, 1533

“The Basilisk is the King of Serpents... It strikes with swell and sight all types of beasts, you must believe, and bears nothing good.”

—Konrad Gesner, *Historiae Animalium*, 1551



Illustration of a basilisk
Konrad Gesner,
Historiae Animalium, 1551



Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim,
De Occulta Philosophia, 1533

Like Harry, many Renaissance alchemists, naturalists, and physicians struggled with the responsibilities that came with their attempts to understand the world. Sixteenth-century occultist, alchemist, and physician Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim believed that ancient magic could be manipulated like a practical science for the betterment of society, though he cautioned against reckless use. Agrippa believed that only those with respect for nature could successfully control it and that those who used magic for selfish or immoral reasons would risk their very souls.

“Magic comprises the most profound contemplation of the most secret things, their nature, power, quality, substance, and virtues, as well as the knowledge of their whole nature.”

—Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim,
De Occulta Philosophia, 1533



The effigies of the Triton and Siren of Nilus.

Illustration of merpeople
The Workes of Ambrose Parey,
translated out of Latine, 1634