As the familiar story goes, not long ago there was an orphan who on his 11th birthday discovered he had a gift that set him apart from his preteen peers. Over the years he endured the usual adolescent challenges – maturation, relationships, social conflicts, general teenage neuroses. He also faced the less common challenge of battling a murderous, psychopathic wizard set on establishing a eugenic police state. I’m referring to the young wizard Harry Potter, the bespeckled, morally-upright protagonist in author JK Rowling’s wildly popular fantasy book series; his nemesis is Lord Voldemort, the story’s malevolent antagonist. And, while it might sound far-fetched, new research suggests that Rowling’s world of house-elves, half-giants and three-headed dogs has the potential to make us nicer people.

With over [450 million](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_books) copies sold, Harry Potter is the best selling book series of all time. But it’s had its reproaches. Various Christian groups in particular took issue with the books, claiming they promoted paganism and witchcraft to children. *Washington Post* book critic Ron Charles called the fact that adults were also hooked on Potter a "bad case of cultural infantilism,” citing the arguably simplistic “good vs evil” premise. Charles and others also cited a certain artistic vapidity in massively commercial story-telling, while others chided Hogwarts, the wizardry academy attended by Potter, for only rewarding innate talents. Christopher Hitchens on the other hand, despite plenty of criticisms of Rowling’s work, praised her for “unmooring” English children’s literature from “dreams of wealth and class and snobbery…and giving us a world of youthful democracy and diversity, in which the humble leading figure has a name that…could as well belong to an English labor union official.” A growing body of evidence suggests that the pro-Potter camp might be on to something, and that reading Rowling’s work, at least as a youth, might be a good thing.

For decades it's been known that an effective means of improving negative attitudes and prejudices between differing groups of people is through intergroup contact – particularly through contact between “in-groups,” or a social group to which someone identifies, and “out-groups,” or a group they don’t identify with or perceive as threatening. Even reading short stories about friendship between in- and out-group characters is enough to improve attitudes toward stigmatized groups in children. A [new study](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jasp.12279/full) published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* found that reading the Harry Potter books in particular has similar effects, likely in part because Potter is continually in contact with stigmatized groups. The “muggles” get no respect in the wizarding world as they lack any magical ability. The “half-bloods,” or “mud-bloods” – wizards and witches descended from only one magical parent – don’t fare much better, while the Lord Voldemort character believes that power should only be held by “pure-blood” wizards. He’s Hitler in a cloak.

The research group, led by professor Loris Vezzali of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia in Italy, conducted three related studies. In the first, 34 elementary school children were given a questionnaire assessing their attitudes towards immigrants, a group frequently stigmatized in Italy. The children were then divided into two groups that met once a week for six weeks to read Harry Potter passages and discuss it with a research assistant. One group read passages relating to prejudice, like the scene where Draco Malfoy, a shockingly blond pure-blood wizard, calls Harry’s friend Hermione a “filthy little Mud-blood.” The control group read excerpts unrelated to prejudice, including the scene where Harry buys his first magic wand. A week after the last session, the children’s attitudes towards out-groups were assessed again. Among those who identified with the Harry Potter character, attitudes toward immigrants were found to be significantly improved in children who’d read passages dealing with prejudice. The attitudes of those who’d read neutral passages hadn’t changed.

Vezzali and colleagues conducted two follow-up studies with similar results. One found that reading Harry Potter improved attitudes towards homosexuals in Italian high school students. The other linked the books with more compassion towards refugees among English university students. Identification with the Potter character didn’t contribute to attitude changes in this older population – presumably college kids don’t identify as much with the younger character – however strongly not identifying with the evil Voldemort did. As the authors write, this is in line with reigning social cognitive theory: “people form attitudes not only by conforming to positive relevant others, but also by distancing themselves from negative relevant others.”

Of course there are many factors that shape our attitudes toward others: the media, our parents and peers, religious beliefs. But Vezzali’s work supports earlier research suggesting that reading novels as a child — implying literary engagement with life’s social, cultural and psychological complexities — can have a positive impact on personality development and social skills. A [study](http://www.sciencemag.org/content/342/6156/377.short) published last year in *Science* found that reading literary fiction, as opposed to popular fiction or nonfiction, results in keener social perception and increased empathy — empathy being defined more or less as the ability to alternate between different perspectives on a particular person or situation. Literature with complex, developed themes and characters appears to let readers occupy or adopt perspectives they might otherwise not consider; and it seems that Rowling might get at the beautiful, sobering mess of life in a way that could have a meaningful impact on our children’s collective character.

Vezzali told me that fantasy may be especially effective in assuaging negative attitudes because the genre typically doesn’t feature actual populations and thus avoids potential defensiveness and sensitivities around political correctness.

“Unfortunately the news we read on a daily basis tells us we have so much work to do!,” Vezzali said. “But based on our work, fantasy books such as Harry Potter may be of great help to educators and parents in teaching tolerance.” Vezzali’s group plans to continue investigating the impact of literature and other prejudice-reduction interventions in the hopes of one day having a real cultural impact.

For the moment, universal acceptance and international peace seem unlikely. But perhaps a trip to the bookstore — or a [few clicks](http://www.powells.com/harry.html) on the Internet—might be a good place to start.

Stetka, Bret. “Why Everyone Should Read Harry Potter.” *Scientific American*, Scientific American, 9 Sept. 2014, www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-everyone-should-read-harry-potter/.