Harry Crushes the Hulk

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Here's what's wrong with kids in the digital age. They live in front of their TV and PC screens. They steal music online. Their attention span is zilch. They multitask on everything and concentrate on nothing except video games. They will buy any trashy product that the media goliaths can sell them, then drop it as soon as the next big hype comes along.

That's merely the short list of hard-wired assumptions that were short-circuited by last weekend's publication of "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix." On Saturday alone, J. K. Rowling's fifth novel sold five million copies nationwide. In a culture where little registers until it's measured in dollars, just do the math. Figure an average price of $20 a "Harry" (allowing for widely varying discounts on the $29.99 list price), and you have a one-day gross, as Variety would say, of $100 million. That's more money than the competing Hollywood fantasy, brought in for its entire opening weekend ($62 million), and, assuming a very conservative average of two readers per book, a larger audience as well.

Let it also be noted that Harry's $100 million is about 35 times the total weekend box-office take ($2.7 million) of Fox's cinematic attempt to cash in on the stars they minted during the first round of their prime-time hit, Maybe there is a God.

Much has been said about how the "Harry Potter" series, in less than five years, has brought kids, boys included, back to reading. But the phenomenon is about more than childhood literacy. The ravenous hunger for Ms. Rowling's novels shows that children are far more discerning than adults tend to give them credit for, especially the adults who sell them entertainment products. The children entranced with Harry don't need a fast cinematic cut to whip them to attention, with an MTV lash, every few seconds. They are perfectly happy to concentrate on a sustained narrative that in sprawls to a Dickensian 870 pages. No sooner did these young customers get their new books in the wee hours last Saturday morning than they sat down and read them — perhaps explaining in part why ticket sales for "The Hulk" actually fell from Friday to Saturday to Sunday last weekend. (Another likely factor: the movie itself.)

As "Harry" readers suffer no shortage of attention span, so they still love fantasy that does not come equipped with computer-generated special effects. The books often seem to be a "celebration of a pre-industrial world," as Alison Lurie has noted, where Hogwarts Castle "is lit by torches and heated by fires" and mail is carried by owls. (American kids do opt for FedEx, though, when it comes to the delivery of online "Harry" orders.) Most of all, the popularity of "Harry" is proof positive that the young recognize quality when they see it.

They spotted Ms. Rowling's talent from the get-go. For all the hokey security measures,
midnight costume parties and other breathlessly chronicled hoopla attending the new installment's arrival, it must be recalled that the Harry Potter craze was not manufactured by a media conglomerate. Its initiating publisher in England, Bloomsbury, is a stand-alone company, as is Scholastic, the publisher that presciently acquired the American rights. When Volume I, was published in America in September 1998, its first printing was 35,000, with a promotional budget of $100,000. That's above average by the standards of children's-book publishing but a mere drop in the media maelstrom.

The book's success bubbled up spontaneously from below, propelled by kids' word of mouth, rather than being imposed by synergistic browbeating from above. At first adults didn't get what was happening. The New York Times, for instance, did not review the first "Harry" until five months after its publication. By that time, "Sorcerer's Stone" had been on the Times's fiction best-seller list for 14 weeks — well past the three-week record for a young readers' book on the list, set by E. B. White with in 1952. It wasn't until two months after that The Times and others started reporting that something extraordinary was afoot. By the next year, The Times would have to bend to Harry's will and initiate its first separate weekly children's best-seller list, lest adult fiction get crowded out by the Rowling juggernaut.

Since that time, a major media company has glommed on to Harry — AOL Time Warner, with which Ms. Rowling made the deal for the film adaptations of her books, the first of which got Americans back into movie theaters en masse for the first time after 9/11. The author has made a public point of her desire to limit the product tie-ins that followed, though not altogether convincingly. Mattel, Lego and Coke all have a piece of the action. But in this case, at least, the art came well before the commerce, and much of the publicity generated by the fifth book was indigenous, if not spontaneous, sparked by genuine demand for the next installment of Harry's tale and the desire of local bookstores to celebrate with their young customers. Scholastic's merchandising budget for "Phoenix" was $3.5 million — very likely a tenth of what Universal has spent to market "The Hulk." Ms. Rowling gave only one brief American TV interview, to Katie Couric, and it was as dim in star wattage as it was on revelation.

As you're reading this, "The Hulk," like other summer hits before it, will probably be on the skids, with a box-office falloff possibly as high as 60 percent for its second weekend, its first step to an oblivion that will end some months from now with its video or DVD being dumped in the sale bin at Wal-Mart. We live in a blockbuster entertainment culture, where the biggest Hollywood movies, most of them pitched at teenagers, saturate the market for a week or two, then vanish with little lasting trace on the collective consciousness. There's not enough time for the word of mouth that might allow something special but not instantly salable to find a mass audience, so why should a big studio take the chance? It's easier just to churn out the proven formulas and franchises, dumb and dumberer with each installment. Hence that rare, unexpected burst of big-studio originality, begets its faded carbon.

This disposable blockbuster machinery is the antithesis of the career trajectory of the "Harry" series. The first novel remains among The Times's top-10 sellers after 178 weeks, well after its film version has come and gone. Volume V is widely regarded as evidence of its author's artistic growth rather than as a mechanical effort to service the brand and its built-in market as expeditiously as possible.

In the new novel, Harry is 15. The readers who started with him five years ago have aged as
well. These high school kids are at once the most prized and despised by our show-biz titans. They are prized because they are a demographic with disposable income and a boundless appetite for all forms of entertainment, collectively an American growth industry (by an average 6 percent a year, according to The Economist) even in an economic downturn. They are despised because of their wholesale theft of that industry's products. The music business's travails — the top 10 albums sold 33 million units in 2002, down from 60 million in 2000 — are attributed to Napster, which arrived just as the first "Harry" novel did, and its current successors, led by KaZaA. The recording industry has tried litigation, legislation, education and inventive to end file-sharing piracy, all to little avail.

The movie industry is next. Without broadband it still takes too long for most kids to download an entire film, but that didn't stop plenty of them from spreading a hijacked work print of "The Hulk" across the Internet two weeks before its premiere. Now that DVD burners are joining CD burners as standard features on home computers, we'll see the wholesale duping of movies from DVD's, whose encryption code is easily hacked. An executive at one of the Hollywood majors told me that there's simply no way now to reverse the mass piracy of any and all material, audio or video, past or present, from the moment it is available in pristine digital form like a CD or DVD. The best hope may be that future releases will be protected when the next generation of digital discs come wrapped in better cyber-protection — a development that could be two to four years away.

The question is: How do all those lovely entertainment-seeking kids weaned on "Harry Potter" grow up to become thieves? Surely, they know that stealing copyrighted songs and movies is akin to shoplifting sweaters at the Gap. There is no single explanation, of course, and there is no acceptable rationalization that can excuse theft. But it's no secret that music piracy spread as CD prices rose and teenagers were enraged to pay roughly the same price as a "Harry" hardcover for a dozen or so tracks of which 10 might be filler.

The moment that Apple put up its iTunes Music Store in April — an elegant site that permits the downloading of songs for keeps, hassle-free, for 99 cents each — at least some music thieves started going legit. As the store's catalog increases and spreads to Windows, and as competitors follow Apple's lead, many more will follow. Far from being a particularly unethical generation, the file-sharing Americans of the Napster era may be no more or less moral than those that came before. They may well be willing to pay for their entertainment — if the quality is guaranteed and the price is fair.

This is a lesson that seems to be lost on a cynical entertainment industry that places Pavlovian marketing above creativity, on the assumption that young consumers don't know the difference. Many of them do know the difference. There is a lot for grownups to learn — and those in Hollywood most of all — by reading the books, not merely the grosses, spawned by Harry Potter.