

The Unsung Hero of *Harry Potter*: Neville Longbottom

The bulk of J.K. Rowling's magical series chronicles the quests and adventures of the obvious hero of the books, Harry Potter. We wouldn't expect anything less. It's also no surprise that the vast majority of the heroism displayed in the story resides firmly within Harry's grasp. Again, we wouldn't expect anything less. What we might not expect is that Neville Longbottom, a character who fumbles and bumbles his way through the entire series, is also a hero. Yet that's exactly what Neville is. Just as Dumbledore says in *Sorcerer's Stone*, while speaking of Neville, that "there are all kinds of courage" (306), there are also all kinds of heroism. Neville's isn't the obvious, grandiose kind. It is understated and subtle, found hidden within his determination to overcome his blundering nature and his refusal to allow other people's unfavorable opinions of him to define him. While Harry's heroism is exciting and entertaining, it's also larger than life. It is Neville's heroism that presents itself in an attainable way, giving it the potential to truly resonate within the life of a child.

If readers were asked which *Harry Potter* character they'd most like to emulate, it's no secret that Neville Longbottom would fall pretty far down on the list. The majority of scenes containing Neville are enough to make anybody cringe. He melts a cauldron in Potions class and blisters himself and his classmates (*Sorcerer's Stone* 139). His first attempt at flying is met with a runaway broomstick and a broken arm (*Sorcerer's Stone* 147). In a Defense Against the Dark Arts class, he is unable to defend himself from Cornish pixies as they seize him by the ears and hang him from a chandelier (*Chamber of Secrets* 102), and while attempting to demonstrate the usefulness of his prized *Mimulus Mimbletonia* plant, he subjects his friends to a deluge of Stinksap (*Order of the Phoenix* 187).

The kindest way to describe Neville is to say he is accident-prone. A statement closer

to the truth would be admitting that he's a disaster waiting to happen. Even his wandwork is deplorable. Described throughout the series as a "round-faced, forgetful boy" (the round-faced aspect no doubt denotes chubbiness), Neville is presented as the classic example of a child outcast. Even Harry, who doesn't choose his friends based on their station in life, at times wishes to avoid Neville, as seen when the students are asked to pair up for practice in Charms class, "Harry's partner was Seamus Finnegan, (which was a relief because Neville had been trying to catch his eye)" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 171).

As is the unfortunate experience of most children like Neville, he is bullied by his fellow classmates. Predictably, Draco Malfoy is the worst offender of the students:

At that moment Neville toppled into the common room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone's guess, because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the Leg-Locker Curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor tower. Everyone fell over laughing except Hermione, who leapt up and performed the countercurse. Neville's legs sprang apart and he got to his feet, trembling.

'What happened?' Hermione asked him . . .

'Malfoy,' said Neville shakily. 'I met him outside the library. He said he'd been looking for someone to practice that on.' (*Sorcerer's Stone* 217-218)

While Malfoy is certainly a menace toward Neville, it is what happens to him at the hands of Professor Snape that is downright sinister:

Neville regularly went to pieces in Potions lessons; it was his worst subject, and his great fear of Professor Snape made things ten times worse . . .

'Longbottom, at the end of this lesson we will feed a few drops of this potion to your toad and see what happens. Perhaps that will encourage you to do it properly.' Snape moved away, leaving Neville breathless with fear.

'Help me!' he moaned to Hermione . . .

'Everyone gather 'round', said Snape, his black eyes glittering, 'and watch what happens to Longbottom's toad. If he has managed to produce a

Shrinking Solution, it will shrink to a tadpole. If, as I don't doubt, he has done it wrong, his toad is likely to be poisoned.' Snape picked up Trevor the toad in his left hand and dipped a small spoon into Neville's potion, which was now green. He trickled a few drops down Trevor's throat. (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 125-128)

In both instances of bullying, not only is Neville treated unkindly, but he's portrayed as a second-class citizen. As disturbing as it may seem, he's essentially being treated like a lab rat. Malfoy uses him to "practice" the Leg-Locker spell on, and Professor Snape finds it perfectly acceptable to subject Neville's beloved pet to what he believes will be a harmful experiment with a potion. One can't imagine Harry Potter handing over Hedwig for Snape to poison. Yet Neville doesn't even put up a fight. He further reveals his defeatist attitude in statements like, "There's no need to tell me I'm not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy's already done that" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 218), and "I'm nobody" (*Order of the Phoenix* 186).

After a glimpse into Neville's home life, it becomes easy to see why Neville holds such a poor opinion of himself. He is being raised by his grandmother, who Rowling describes as "formidable-looking" throughout the series, and of whom Neville makes the heart-breaking admission to Harry, "You should hear my gran talk about you . . . she'd give anything to have you as a grandson" (*Half-Blood Prince* 139). A scene in *Order of the Phoenix* demonstrates the dynamics of Neville's relationship with his grandmother rather well. They are in St. Mungo's hospital, visiting Neville's mentally disabled parents, when Harry, Ron and Hermione discover them:

The curtains had been drawn back from the two beds at the end of the ward and two visitors were walking back down the aisle between the beds: a formidable-looking old witch wearing a long green dress, a moth-eaten fox fur and a pointed hat decorated with what was unmistakably a stuffed vulture and, trailing behind her looking thoroughly depressed – Neville. (*Order of the Phoenix* 512)

Neville's grandmother is a woman who has chosen a vulture, which is a bird that

feeds on carnage, as a headdress. It is clearly no accident that Rowling personifies the woman in this way. After she's introduced to Neville's friends, she doesn't hesitate to feast on him in front of them:

'Yes, Neville's told me all about you. Helped him out of a few sticky spots, haven't you? He's a good boy,' she said, casting a sternly appraising look down her rather bony nose at Neville, 'but he hasn't got his father's talent, I'm afraid to say' And she jerked her head in the direction of two beds at the end of the ward, so that the stuffed vulture on her hat trembled alarmingly. (*Order of the Phoenix* 513)

Perhaps that vulture trembled because it knew what was coming next. She's already humiliated Neville by declaring him to be talentless. She proceeds to expose the condition of Neville's parents, something Neville has chosen to keep secret, to his classmates:

'What's this?' said Mrs. Longbottom sharply. 'Haven't you told your friends about your parents, Neville?'

Neville took a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. Harry could not remember ever feeling sorrier for anyone, but he could not think of any way of helping Neville out of the situation.

'Well it's nothing to be ashamed of!' said Mrs. Longbottom angrily . . .

'I'm not ashamed,' said Neville faintly, still looking anywhere but at Harry and the others . . .

'You've got a funny way of showing it!' said Mrs. Longbottom. 'My son and his wife,' she said, turning haughtily to Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny, 'were tortured into insanity by You-Know-Who's followers.' (*Order of the Phoenix* 514)

This is the kind of scenario that can scar a kid for life. Mrs. Longbottom is a parent who exposes her child instead of sheltering him. One wonders if she has a single nurturing bone in her body. How heartless must she be to brashly disparage Neville in front of his peers? Even if she's given the benefit of the doubt, as it's possible she truly feels she's instructing Neville here, the poor boy is woefully misunderstood. What child should be

expected to broadcast his personal tragedy to the world? Perhaps he doesn't even yet have the maturity to fully grasp what has happened to his parents. If Mrs. Longbottom had any consideration at all for her grandson, she'd respect his choice to keep his personal life a private matter from his classmates.

Neville Longbottom, at times his own worst enemy, and a sitting duck for any bully within his vicinity (including his own grandmother), is on a path traveling as far away from valor as one can get. Where then, is the heroism? For those of us who are watching closely, Rowling divulges the key to Neville's success in one of his early scenes at Hogwarts. In *Sorcerer's Stone*, we're told that "Neville needed a leg up" when he first climbs through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room (130). This happens directly after the Sorting Hat has taken "a long time" before finally placing Neville in Gryffindor House to begin with (120), "where dwell the brave at heart" (118).

There is more to Neville Longbottom than meets the eye. He belongs in Gryffindor House, yet he needs a leg up to make it through the door. Perhaps he's left one foot hanging over the threshold. Either way, from here on out, the path to heroism is set for Neville. He must trade his cowardice for courage if he ever hopes to reach his destination, as no form of heroism can exist without courage, and the Hogwarts bullies are the first obstacle along his path. Yet... he needs that leg up. He finds it first from Ron and Harry. While speaking of Malfoy, Ron explains to Neville, "He's used to walking all over people, but that's no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 218). Then Harry follows up with, "The sorting hat chose you for Gryffindor, didn't it? And where's Malfoy? In stinking Slytherin" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 218).

Receiving a leg up is only valuable if its recipient decides to make good use of it, and Neville does. He responds to the next session of Malfoy's bullying with, "I'm worth 12 of you, Malfoy" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 223). Not only does Neville take Ron and Harry's words to heart, but he finds his own voice and speaks up to Malfoy himself. He's learned he can defend himself against his attacker, and it takes great courage to speak up to a bully.

After another round of humiliation at the hands of Professor Snape, who relishes in informing Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor Lupin of Neville's numerous

shortcomings (in front of the whole class, of course), Neville finds another leg up. This time it's from Professor Lupin, who comes to Neville's defense against Snape with, "I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation . . . and I'm sure he will perform it admirably" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 132). The "operation" Professor Lupin refers to is allowing the students to be faced with a boggart, a creature that transforms itself into that which one most fears. It's overcome by mastering the "riddikulus" charm, which transforms the creature into something comical. For Neville, what he fears most is Professor Snape, and yet he handles this situation remarkably well:

A jet of sparks shot from the end of Professor Lupin's wand and hit the doorknob. The wardrobe burst open. Hook-nosed and menacing, Professor Snape stepped out, his eyes flashing at Neville. Neville backed away, his wand up, mouthing wordlessly. Snape was bearing down upon him, reaching inside his robes.

'R – r – riddikulus!' squeaked Neville.

There was a noise like a whip crack. Snape stumbled; he was wearing a long, lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture, and he was swinging a huge crimson handbag. (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 137)

Neville succeeds in dressing boggart Snape in Grandmother Longbottom's clothes, right down to the vulture-covered headdress. Quite an accomplishment. Even more impressive is Neville's second encounter with the boggart:

'Forward, Neville, and finish him off!' said Lupin as the boggart landed on the floor as a cockroach. *Crack!* Snape was back. This time Neville charged forward looking determined.

'Riddikulus!' he shouted, and they had a split second's view of Snape in his lacy dress before Neville let out a great 'Ha!' of laughter, and the boggart exploded, burst into a thousand tiny wisps of smoke, and was gone.

'Excellent!' cried Professor Lupin as the class broke into applause.

'Excellent, Neville. Well done' (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 139)

The value of encouragement, especially from an authority figure, cannot be

underestimated. One can imagine the elation Neville must feel after achieving such a triumph in front of his classmates. What he does with the boggart can certainly be considered heroic. It even garners applause from his audience, and even though Neville can't transform the real Professor Snape into wearing Mrs. Longbottom's clothes, it isn't hard to imagine that the mere idea of it is enough to give Neville something to hold over the vicious Potions master from here on out. Neville didn't only transform that boggart, he actually vanquished it.

Professor Lupin believed in Neville, and Neville responded accordingly. That kind of leg up is desperately needed, and yet it isn't as invaluable as the next one Neville receives. A child's self-image is rooted deep within they are treated at home, and Neville cannot be any more trod-upon in that respect. Even into his sixth year at Hogwarts, Neville hasn't shaken his grandmother's heavy-handed disapproval. He reveals that, once again, he's fallen short of his grandmother's expectations. While he's achieved an "Outstanding" O.W.L (Ordinary Wizarding Level) in Herbology, his grandmother is pushing him to continue with Transfiguration, which he isn't qualified for. He also performs well at Charms, yet his grandmother considers this class to be too "soft" and Neville hasn't yet found it within himself to stand up to her. Along comes this most-needed leg up:

'Hmph,' snorted Professor McGonagall. 'It's high time your grandmother learned to be proud of the grandson she's got, rather than the one she thinks she ought to have . . . Take Charms,' said Professor McGonagall, 'and I shall drop Augusta a line reminding her that just because *she* failed her Charms O.W.L., the subject is not necessarily worthless.' Smiling slightly at the look of delighted incredulity on Neville's face, Professor McGonagall tapped a blank schedule with the tip of her wand (*Half-Blood Prince* 174)

Three cheers for Professor McGonagall! Someone is finally going to tell off that cold-hearted, vulture-headed woman. Unfortunately Neville won't be there to witness it, but no matter, he's just discovered that his grandmother's word isn't law. Not only does Neville take McGonagall's advice with his class schedule, but he pours himself into improving his wandwork when he joins Dumbledore's Army, a covert Defense Against the Dark Arts class.

With Harry's instruction and encouragement, "Neville had improved beyond all recognition" (*Order of the Phoenix* 345).

He puts his newfound courage and ability to good use in the battle at the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry of Magic, where he fights Death Eaters alongside Harry. Even though the fumbles and bumbles still follow him (at one point he accidentally disarms Harry instead of a Death Eater) he valiantly refuses to leave Harry's side even after he's come face to face with Bellatrix Lestrange, the woman responsible for torturing Neville's parents. In the course of the battle, he receives (and is subsequently forced to speak with) a broken nose, but this doesn't hold him back:

'Longbottom?' repeated Bellatrix, and a truly evil smile lit her gaunt face.

'Why, I have had the pleasure of meeting your parents, boy . . . ?'

'I DOE YOU HAB!' roared Neville, and he fought so hard against his captor's encircling grip that the Death Eater shouted, 'Someone Stun him!'

'No, no, no,' said Bellatrix. She looked transported, alive with excitement as she glanced at Harry, then back at Neville. 'No, let's see how long Longbottom lasts before he cracks like his parents' (*Order of the Phoenix* 800)

It is not possible to have faced such an encounter without possessing heroism within one's heart. Neville is standing before the woman who destroyed his childhood. She threatens to do the same to him as she's done to his parents, and yet he refuses to back down. It isn't hard to imagine that he was even willing to die in this scene. Fortunately, he doesn't have to, as Neville and Harry are rescued moments later by the arrival of the members of the Order of The Phoenix (*Order of the Phoenix* 801).

By the final installment of the Harry Potter series, Neville has shrugged off his cringe-worthy beginnings. He's even stepped up to a position of leadership in Harry's absence at Hogwarts, where he encourages other students to fight against the Death Eaters who've infiltrated the school (*Deathly Hallows* 575). As if signaling his complete transformation, Rowling even grants Neville a touch of his own, grandiose heroism, as he slaughters Voldemort's snake:

In one swift, fluid motion, Neville broke free of the Body-Bind Curse upon him . . . The slash of the silver blade could not be heard over the roar of the oncoming crowd or the sounds of the clashing giants or of the stampeding centaurs, and yet it seemed to draw every eye. With a single stroke Neville sliced off the great snake's head. . . . (*Deathly Hallows* 733)

If Neville did leave one foot hanging over the threshold of Gryffindor House on that first day he went through the portrait hole, he's definitely got both feet in now. He's just wielded the sword of Gryffindor, something only a *true* Gryffindor can do (*Chamber of Secrets* 334). By slaying that snake, which was the last horcrux containing a bit of Voldemort's soul, he's just paved the way for Harry to finish off the evil villain.

In the grand scheme of things within the *Harry Potter* world, Neville Longbottom will never equal out to Harry himself. He won't even come close. Yet, neither will any other child, be they within *Harry Potter* or without. What Neville *can* do that perhaps Harry can't, is reach out to the average, ordinary child who needs to know that it's okay to need a leg up. The one who will never be the grandiose hero, the popular athletic jock or the sought-after beauty queen. The one who is used as a stepping stone. The one who's been allowing the sorry lot he's been dealt in life to sink him. Neville has shown that a child can't allow others to define him, that he must dig deep and define himself. Can it really be as simple as that, and if so, is it really heroism?

Ask the kids who are always picked last for teams in gym class. Ask the little boy who's sought out day after day by the bullies on the playground. Ask the little girl whose own mother doesn't think she's worth much. Ask all the Neville Longbottoms of the world, and they'll tell you. They'd stand up and cheer, and then they'd shout, *Neville Longbottom is our hero.*

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