

Classics in Rainbow Rowell's Simon Snow Trilogy

Rainbow Rowell's three Simon Snow books—*Carry On* (2015), *Wayward Son* (2019), and *Any Way the Wind Blows* (2021)—trace the ups and downs of a collection of friends on the cusp of adulthood. When we meet them in *Carry On*, they are students in their final year at the Watford School of Magicks in the UK. In *Wayward Son* they journey to the US, and in *Any Way the Wind Blows* they learn how to chart their way in the world beyond school. The main character, Simon Snow, seems like a typical “chosen one,” an outsider with extraordinary capabilities who is tasked with fighting the Humdrum, a being who threatens the magical world. All this may sound like standard, if magical, fare—familiar from the Harry Potter series and elsewhere—but surprises and subversions are in store. Simon's trip to Watford at the start of *Carry On* is markedly mundane: no Platform 9 3/4 and Hogwarts Express here. In the course of *Carry On*, Simon and his friends come to realize that Simon's spectacular uses of magic create dark spots of magic-less-ness and that the Humdrum is an echo of Simon himself. Though Simon defeats the Humdrum, he loses his formidable purchase on magic as a result. And as if Rowell is in queer conversation with the Twilight franchise as well as Harry Potter, Simon falls in love with the vampire Baz, his roommate and former nemesis. Throughout the Simon Snow series, Rowell both engages and twists expectations raised and solidified by popular books about magical schools and supernatural beings.

Classical mythology's legacy of fantastic creatures and the frequent association of magic and Latin might well lead readers to expect that Classics will be part of Rowell's picture. And, to be sure, Rowell populates her world with some ancient Greek and Roman mythological beings: chimeras, minotaurs, dryads, nymphs, centaurs, sirens, fauns, phoenixes, basilisks, and sphinxes.

But she also includes plenty of non-Classical entities: the Humdrum, goblins, pixies, trolls, numpties, ne'er do-wolves, and worsegers. Not only are these beings not specifically Classical, but their very names—with the possible exception of “goblins”—are also not based in Latin or Greek. Germanic and Scandinavian etymologies counterbalance the Classically sourced names, adding linguistic variety to ontological diversity. I am particularly drawn to (even charmed by) the last two category names in the list, which both use solidly Old English components. “Ne'er-do-wolves” is a tweak of “ne'er-do-wells,” and “worsegers” is a play on “badgers,” the adjective “bad,” and its irregular comparative form. What are worsegers? “Like badgers but worse,” Penelope (Simon’s long-time best friend) explains in *Carry On* (132). With ne'er-do-wolves and worsegers Rowell seems to be making a point of creating non-Classical beings. Still, even the students at Watford seem to expect Classical creatures to be more central or privileged in this world than they turn out to be. The Watford coat of arms contains an image of the school’s winged goats, but Simon and others had assumed—throughout their Watford years—that pegasuses were being depicted. We may look to Classics for magic when it’s right under our non-Classical noses.

This holds especially true for spells in Rowell’s magical world. The antiquity of Latin and its associations with esoteric knowledge have made it a fitting candidate for a magical language in the popular imagination. The Latinate spells studied by Harry Potter et al. at Hogwarts are a recent manifestation of the long-standing connection between Latin and magic. The connection has become so traditional that it might be considered a given. In the Simon Snow novels, however, magic is channeled through turns of phrase popularized in everyday speech and quotidian contexts. Magicians learn how to tap into the power of expressions like “clean as a whistle,” Shakespearean tags such as “out, out, damned spot,” lyrics like “candle in the wind,” or

well-known quotations from movies such as “these aren’t the droids you’re looking for.” These words’ popularity among non-magicians is what gives them strength, and their magic potential diminishes when or where they are not spoken. For instance, phrases that can be used as spells in England (like “ship-shape and Bristol fashion”) may not work in the United States, and in areas unpopulated by “Normals” magic isn’t available at all. In Rowell’s formulation, Latin’s current disuse makes it an unlikely magical language. Pig Latin, however, proves effective, and one of the British magic community’s most powerful spells (which prevents magicians from talking about Watford) is in Pig Latin: “Ix-nay on the atford-Way.” In the popular conception of magic, Latinate spells seems to transcend time and place; in the Simon Snow books, magic spells are rooted in the language of particular places and times.

By contrast, Latin is a common component in J. K. Rowling’s spells in the Harry Potter series. We might consider “Wingardium Leviosa,” which Harry, Ron, and Hermione practice in their Charms class in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Although “wing” is derived from an Old Norse word, the “-ium” suffix makes the whole word sound Latinesque, and both the base and suffix of “leviosa” are Latinate. Rowling’s combination of elements is clever. The whole phrase has a Classical ring, but “wing” and “levi-“ (which readers are likely to know from words like “levitate”) clearly convey that the spell’s intended effect is to make things fly. Rowling harnesses the cachet of Latin so that readers get the gratification of encountering seemingly arcane knowledge while being able to stay on comfortably familiar ground. When Hermione tries to help Ron with casting the spell, her advice centers on his pronunciation: she tells him to emphasize the “gar” and “o” syllables in the respective words (171). That is, she steers him toward voicing the words according to Latin pronunciation rules. Even though the spell isn’t actual Latin, it is made to sound like Latin, and Hermione’s advanced knowledge and skill are

demonstrated through her expertise at Latinate pronunciation. Rowling's spells may incorporate non-Classical elements and made-up words, but within those confections Latin still has a privileged place. I think that the comparison between Rowling and Rowell's spell-making underscores how much Rowell is working against expectation in her treatment of magical language.

Rowell dislodges Classics from the privileged place it traditionally occupies in magical utterances. While that displacement occurs in the register of Rowell's world-building, within the narrative we can find a parallel move in the Mage's educational reforms. As headmaster of Watford the Mage seeks to dismantle the exclusionary nature of the institution manifest in both its admissions policy and its curriculum. The academically accomplished Penelope may decry the Mage's decision to shrink the role of Classics at Watford, but the Mage aims to insure that magic isn't the province of solely the elite, and he works to align the school's focus with the way magic, in Rowell's world, is intertwined with the current language of everyday people. The Mage proves problematic (understatement!), and he commits villainous acts, but aspects of his educational modifications at Watford address concerns about academia and privilege (as well as the association of Classics with both of those things) that readers might share. Reflecting a commitment to inclusion, the Mage's reforms complicate his character and may make him sympathetic to some extent. While Latin and Greek classes continue to exist at Watford, the very way in which they are present marks their past-ness: they are of historical interest, and thus relevant to scholars, but not central in the curriculum nor necessary for the successful use of magic.

That Classics can have associations with the scholarly and the aristocratic is evident even in the names of Simon's three main companions throughout the novels, Agatha, Baz, and

Penelope. Agatha—whose name is a feminine form of the Greek adjective meaning “good” or “noble”—comes from a wealthy family with longstanding status in the magical community. Baz’s first name is actually Tyrannus, Greek for “tyrant;” he doesn’t use it (preferring the shortened form of his middle name, Basilton), but the name is traditional in his family and Baz says that his mother “insisted” on it (380). Baz’s mother’s insistence on a Classical name for her son seems doubly fitting: not only was she a member of one of the “Old Families,” but she was also an academic. The head at Watford before the Mage, she made sure that Baz’s own Classical studies started early and continued beyond the classroom. As for Penelope, her name recalls the clever spouse of Odysseus from Greek mythology. In Penelope’s case, a Classically connected name isn’t a marker of upperclass credentials, but it may instead reflect the fact that both of her parents are scholars. Even if readers don’t consciously note the etymological origins of these names, the names’ Classical heritage provides them with a texture and attendant associations that dovetail with and reinforce Rowell’s use of them.

Classics remains available as a touchstone in Rowell’s world. When exclaiming, characters invoke historical magical figures, Classical among them, as in “Sweet Circe” (*Wayward Son* 347). The addition of a Classical reference may add flare or gravity to a utterance, making it more fitting for a paranormal context. For instance, Penelope refers to a demon-cursed character as being “up the River Styx without a paddle” (*Any Way* 246). And Simon makes use of a Classical comparison when he retroactively describes himself as having entered Watford like a kind Trojan Horse—a seemingly innocuous new student who poses a danger no one realizes at the time (*Carry On* 35). Simon also calls on Classics in *Wayward Son*, this time to express his exasperation with the group’s drive across the US. Simon replays his exchange with Baz:

“You’re supposed to get out and see things, meet people—lotus-eaters and sirens.”

“That’s not a road trip,” Baz says, “that’s the *Odyssey*. When did you read the *Odyssey*, Snow?”

“The Mage made me read it—I think he wanted it to rub off on me—and it is so a road trip!”

Baz smiles at me. Like he hasn’t in a while. Like he almost never has, in public—like it’s easy. “You’re right, Snow. Better tie you to the mast.” (103-104)

Though this moment passes breezily, it contains some interesting features worth lingering on. We see that, despite the Mage’s reforms, he wasn’t trying to get rid of Classics altogether. He wanted to promote some continuity or connection among Classical mythology, Classical learning, and Simon as the “chosen one.” Whatever the Mage’s grand intentions in having Simon read the *Odyssey*, Simon invokes it for his own purposes here, and it provides unexpected common ground for Simon and Baz. Baz even makes it the occasion for good-humored joking at the end of the passage when he casts Simon as Odysseus. Here Classics enables a good moment for a couple who has been having some challenges at relating as a couple. It establishes some shared experience and affords an opportunity for affectionate banter. And while Baz is right in some way—a road trip isn’t the *Odyssey*—so is Simon: their road trip isn’t Homer’s *Odyssey*, but it is *their* odyssey, filled with adventures of its own, analogous yet distinct. For Rowell’s characters, Classics, though past, is present, but not omnipresent nor solely present. It’s one component of their layered, manifold world. And while Classics can have problematic ties to privilege, it can also provide historical perspective and points of reference. For all its

supernatural elements and fantastic scenarios, Rowell's magical world reflects, and reflects on, the presence of Classics in our own.

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