Wizard wonders

The magical world of Harry Potter comes to FAU in a historical exhibition

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Harry Potter is a fantasy character introduced to readers by author J.K. Rowling. Although the books and movies are about a world of wizards, they're based on 15th- and 16th-century Renaissance traditions that played a role in the development of Western medicine.

Making its debut at FAU, the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health bring “Harry Potter’s World: Renaissance, Science, Magic and Medicine.” From March 22 through April 30, the exhibit will be displayed in the main lobby of the Boca campus’s Wimberly Library.

The exhibit includes six panels that explore Harry Potter’s wizardry’s roots in astrology, alchemy and natural philosophy. The display links the wizards from the books and movies to some of the most important philosophers of the 15th and 16th centuries.

Along with the exhibit, students can take the elevator to the fifth floor, where a European rare book collection is displayed. Some of these books describe early discoveries in medicine, which relate to Harry Potter’s works in heralogy. Also displayed are books from different philosophers, like Galileo and Isaac Newton.

“It’s a connection between our rare books and Harry Potter,” said Justin Rust, coordinator of music and outreach at FAU.

Rust helped write the grant that made it possible for the exhibit to come to FAU. The exhibition itself cost FAU between $1,000 and $2,000.

In the first book, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, Hermione, Ron and Harry try to find the sorcerer’s stone before their nemesis Voldemort does. They find out that Nicolas Flamel, the creator of the stone, made it to have eternal life, but Flamel isn’t a fictional character: He is one of the most famous alchemists of his time.

The exhibit explains that “The goal of alchemy is to turn gold into an elixir that would grant eternal life.” Although Flamel is not a fictional character, the sorcerer’s stone, also known as the philosopher’s stone, is fiction.

“I had no idea that a character from the movie was an actual philosopher,” said Michele Tammico, a junior media and cultural studies major. “It’s an intelligent way to relate fantasy to real life.”

According to William Miller, dean of libraries, the exhibit has traveled all over the country, and FAU is not the first university to have the display.

Miller said he is not interested in the Harry Potter books and movies himself, but he understands the “magic” behind it.

“It’s a gradual break between science and magic,” said Miller.

The exhibit also includes lectures from professors at FAU, with discussions ranging from philosophy to physics.

Each speaker relates to Harry Potter in their own way, linking and explaining the close relation between science, medicine and magic (see side bar on lecture times).

The first lecture was on March 23 by Marina Banchetti, associate professor of philosophy and associate dean of the College of Arts and Letters. Banchetti’s lecture on “The Influence of Renaissance Hermeticism on the Scientific Revolution” only had three people show up for it, but Miller hopes for an increase in students’ attendance.

“It’s hard to get students to come to lectures because they sit in lectures all day,” he said. “But it’s good for those that are interested.”

The exhibit is free, and students interested in the exhibit can visit the main lobby of the library during library hours.

For more information, visit: library.fau.edu.

Lecture Dates:

April 1 at 2 p.m.: “Medicine, Magic and the Culture of Humanism in Renaissance Europe,” by Ben Lowe

April 14 at 2 p.m.: “Johannes Kepler (1571-1630): A Man of Contrasts,” by Robin Jordan

April 16 at 7 p.m.: book arts lecture by Daniel Kelm