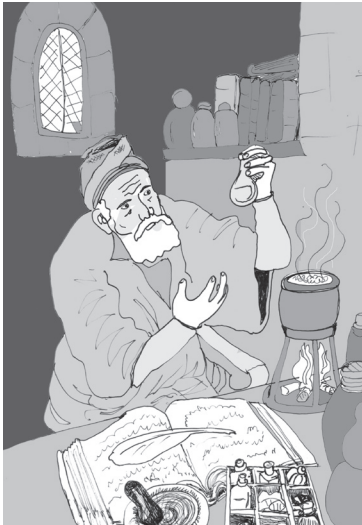


Alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone

The Wizarding World Meets the Real World (But Not Really)



The first *Harry Potter* book has a different title in England than in America. In England it's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. In America, it's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. This is because the publisher worried that most Americans wouldn't get "philosopher's stone." But the British title is actually more appropriate. Here's why.

Throughout history, kings, queens, and others searched for the philosopher's stone. Why? Because of its two legendary powers. One was that it could make gold. The other is it could make you live forever.

Alchemy was the attempt to turn ordinary substances into gold or a potion for an everlasting life. Alchemy is the ancestor of modern-day chemistry. It was a secretive and mysterious art—kind of like the Dark Arts. Alchemy was a mix of chemistry and sorcery. But sorcery, ghosts, and demons were as real to people 200 years ago as DNA is to us today.

People who practiced alchemy were called alchemists. Alchemists tried to find the philosopher's stone. This legendary stone was not really a rock. It was a magical substance that could be used to do two things. The first was change regular metals into gold. Whoever had the

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philosopher's stone would be rich. The second was to make the elixir of life. An elixir is kind of like a medicine. Drinking the elixir of life would make you live forever.

Alchemists believed that the world was made from four elements. These are earth, air, fire, and water. Modern science tells us that the world is made up of elements, too (and atoms).

Alchemists worked in labs. These were very similar Harry Potter's Potions classes. Alchemists mixed different—and often weird—things together. They recited spells. They hoped to their potions would become the philosopher's stone. None ever did, as you can imagine.

Modern science is able to do what alchemist could not. Chemists can combine certain elements to create gold. Unfortunately, it costs much more to make gold than to buy it. So it's not worth the effort.

Modern chemistry can't make you live forever, but it can help people live longer lives. As science advances, it could help people live to be 120 or even 150 years old. They believe that such a long life will be possible through a mix of healthy living and gene therapy. They also believe that these scientific advances could happen within your lifetime. But don't tell You-Know-Who.

