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# Cover Story

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## Wild About Harry

■ By Paul Gray



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# Wild About Harry



The exploits of a young wizard have enchanted kids and adults alike and brought a new kind of magic to children's literature

By PAUL GRAY

**F**irst of all, for the uninitiated, here are three surefire, clinically tested signs that you are a Muggle:

- 1) You spot a boy or girl whose forehead is emblazoned with a paste-on tattoo in the shape of a purple lightning bolt and have no idea what you are seeing.
- 2) You still believe reading is a lost art, especially among the young, and books have been rendered obsolete in our electronic, hot-wired age.
- 3) You don't know what a Muggle is.

Fortunately, such ignorance has become almost ridiculously easy to remedy. Simply place yourself in the vicinity of a child, just about any child, anywhere, and say the magic words Harry Potter. If, for instance, you utter this charm to Anna Hinkley, 9, a third-grader in Santa Monica, Calif., here is what you will learn: "What happens in the first book, Harry discovers that he's a wizard, and he's going to a school called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. At the station he meets a boy named Ron, who's also going to

Hogwarts. And on the train, they meet a girl named Hermione..." Given enough time, Anna will tell you the entire plot of a 309-page novel called Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, which she has read, she confides, "seven or eight times."

And that book is only the opening chapter of a story that has become one of the most bizarre and surreal in the annals of publishing. Muggles, i.e., those who are unaware of all the wizardry afoot in the world around them, will need a brief recap if they're ever to catch up.

So, in the beginning, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone [or Philosopher's Stone, as it was originally named], written by a previously unknown author named J. (for Joanne) K. Rowling, appeared in Britain in June 1997 as a juvenile-fiction title. Abracadabra! it careered to the top of the adult best-seller lists. The same eerie thing happened when the book was published September 1998 in the U.S.

Next came Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, which proved itself, both in Britain and the U.S., as salesworthy as its predecessor. So far, the first two Harry Potter books

have sold almost 2 million copies in Britain and more than 5 million in the U.S. The novels have been translated into 28 languages, including Icelandic and Serbo-Croatian. The best-seller chart in last Sunday's New York Times Book Review ranks *The Sorcerer's Stone*, in its 38th week on the list, as the No. 1-selling hardback novel and *The Chamber of Secrets*, in its 13th week, as No. 3.

But this arrangement will change almost immediately because the story keeps on developing. Last Wednesday *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic Press; 435 pages; \$19.95) finally went on sale in the U.S., exactly two months after its publication in Britain. Those U.S. readers who had not managed to obtain a copy of the British edition, chiefly through Internet orders, swamped bookstores nationwide. From El Centro, Calif., to Littleton, N.H., many stores opened for business at 12 a.m.; others offered customers tea and crumpets or steep initial discounts. Barbara Babbit Kaufman, president and founder of the Chapter 11 bookstore chain in Atlanta, reports selling more *Harry Potter* books in the first three hours of business than Tom Wolfe's novel *A Man in Full*, sold during its first day of availability last November. "Tom Wolfe's was set in Atlanta," she says, "so it was the hottest book we'd ever had." Until, that is, the new *Harry Potter* hit the shelves.

Not everyone welcomed the prospect of a third best-selling Rowling novel in the U.S. Says David Rosenthal, publisher of Simon & Schuster: "There is a big controversy stirring over whether *Harry Potter* should be on the New York Times bestseller list. There are a number of publishers--I don't happen to be among them, actually, but I've got calls about

this--who are thinking about banding together to beg the New York Times not to include the *Harry Potter* books on the regular fiction best-selling list, since they now take up two slots and will soon take up a third."

The argument that a list of regular best sellers should exclude children's best sellers will strike most people as preposterous. But then the whole *Harry Potter* hubbub seems equally outlandish--the proliferating pages that fans are posting almost daily on the Web, the word-of-mouth testimonials from parents marveling that their nonreading children (even boys!) are tearing through the *Potter* books and begging for more, the confessions of a growing number of adults not so young that they find these young-adult books irresistible. And the arrival of *Harry Potter* and the *Prisoner of Azkaban* will only add more fuel to the *Potter* conflagration and prompt anew the question that is baffling many non-*Harry* publishers and readers alike: What on earth is going on here?

If there were an easy answer, nearly every other writer on earth would by now be beaver away at imitations of Rowling's formula for success, and the world would be teeming with best sellers about prepubescent wizards attending bizarre boarding schools somewhere in the north of Britain. And, in fact, it is not particularly hard to figure out the rules governing the *Harry Potter* books. Place appealing characters in interesting but perilous situations and leave the outcome in doubt for as long as possible. Nothing new here, nothing that storytellers as far back as Homer did not grasp and gainfully employ. But, as devoted *Harry Potter* fans have learned, knowing a magic charm is not the same thing as performing magic. Rowling's secret is as simple and mysterious as her

uncanny ability to nourish the human hunger for enchantment: she knows how to feed the desire not just to hear or read a story but to live it as well.

That is why so many people both young and naive and older and jaded have surrendered to the illusions set forth in Harry Potter's fictional world. They want to believe the unbelievable, and Rowling makes it easy and great good fun for them to do so. How pleasant to be persuaded that an orphan named Harry Potter, who has lived for 10 years with the Dursleys, his cruel aunt and uncle and their hateful son Dudley, in a faceless English suburb--specifically 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging--learns shortly after his 11th birthday that he is really a wizard. What's more, he is famous throughout the wizard world; although his parents were murdered by the evil Lord Voldemort (so feared that he is referred to only as "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named"), the infant Harry survived the attack with a lightning-bolt-shaped scar on his forehead.

Every event in the Potter books follows seamlessly from his initial self-discovery. Harry may be a skinny kid with glasses, green eyes and an unruly shock of black hair, but he also harbors uncertain potentialities. Did he thwart Voldemort's assault because of innate goodness or because he carries, even as an infant, a strain of evil more powerful than that of the Dark Wizard's? This question will remind some of the Star Wars films and the tangled destinies of Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker. But once such comparisons begin, they can lead in many directions.

Harry's shuttling between two worlds is also reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's Alice, L. Frank Baum's Dorothy in her journey to Oz, and the

time-traveling earth children who keep reappearing in C. S. Lewis' seven-volume *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Like them, Harry is young enough both to adapt to altered realities and to observe them with a minimum of preconceptions. Also, the sorcerer's stone in the first Harry Potter book bears an obvious kinship with the all-powerful ring pursued in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

But Rowling's indebtedness to classical fantasy literature should not overshadow the liberties she takes with the form. Most notably, her wizard world is not at all remote from daily realities. It takes a cyclone to transport Dorothy to Oz. In contrast, Harry can walk a few steps through a London pub near Charing Cross Road and enter Diagon Alley, a wizard shopping bazaar, where he and his classmates meet late each summer to buy school supplies. And getting from there to Hogwarts is a snap; Harry and his friends go to King's Cross Station and board the Hogwarts Express, which departs early every September from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

It isn't necessary to have finished the first two Harry Potters before beginning *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, but it's a good idea just the same. Reading the books in proper order conveys a comforting sense of familiarity. Yep, the crenelated towers of Hogwarts look just the same as they did last year. And why not? The school is more than 1,000 years old. The academic and athletic competitions among the four Hogwarts residence houses--Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw--remain as spirited as before. All the students are still mad about Quidditch, a hectic sport involving six goals, four moving balls and two seven-member teams careering 50 ft. or more above ground on flying broomsticks. Harry is

the star player for the Gryffindor squad.

Such unchanging details make Rowling's innovations in each book seem particularly dramatic. This time out, for example, third-year students with signed permission slips from a parent or guardian are allowed periodic visits to Hogsmeade, a nearby village known as "the only entirely non-Muggle settlement in Britain." Naturally, Harry's vile Uncle Vernon refuses to sign anything relating to Hogwarts, so Harry faces the prospect of missing the fun or finding a way around the rules. And Harry meets another little problem: a dangerous killer has escaped from the wizard prison of Azkaban and is reportedly on his way to Hogwarts for the purpose of murdering Harry.

He has survived a serious threat to his life in each of the first two books, but this time Harry may be overmatched. The Azkaban prison guards, horrid hooded apparitions called dementors, have been summoned to Hogwarts to protect Harry, but he keeps fainting whenever a dementor comes near him. A sympathetic professor tells Harry why dementors merit fear: "They breed in the darkest, filthiest places, they create decay and despair, they drain peace, hope and happiness out of any human who comes too close to them... Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can't see them. Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. You'll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life."

This speech is one of the darkest and most unsettling in the Potter books to date. It creates a vivid physical embodiment of a painful mental state, which Muggles call depression, and it demonstrates Rowling's

considerable emotional range. She can be both genuinely scary and consistently funny, adept at both broad slapstick and allusive puns and wordplay. She appeals to the peanut gallery with such items as Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, a wizard candy that means what it says on its package; it offers every flavor, ranging from chocolate and peppermint to liver and tripe and earwax. But Rowling also names the Hogwarts caretaker Argus Filch, evidently hoping that a few adult readers will remember that Argus, in Greek mythology, was a watchman with eyes all over his body. And even if no one else picks up the reference, it's the sort of touch that can prompt an author's inward smile.

It was such fun to write," Rowling says of the first Harry Potter book. "They still are incredibly fun to write." She lives comfortably but not lavishly in Edinburgh with her daughter Jessie, 6, fending off as many outside demands on her time as she can in order to keep writing. She was completely unprepared for, and doesn't much like, all the press attention that has been mounting since she became a best-selling first novelist. During some early interviews, she mentioned that her beginning work on the Harry Potter books corresponded briefly with a bad patch in her personal life. She was newly divorced, temporarily out of work, on the dole and living in an unheated Edinburgh flat. To keep them both warm, she would wheel her young daughter into a cafe and sometimes jot down Harry Potter ideas on napkins.

Rowling grew annoyed when newspapers played up this anecdote as a dominant chapter in her life. "It was a great story," she concedes. "I would have liked to read it about someone else." But the tale came to define her, the product of a middle-class family and



a university education, as a welfare mom who hit the jackpot. Worse, some papers began using her success as an implied criticism of poor, single women who lacked the gumption to write themselves off the dole. "That's absolute rubbish," Rowling says. "This is not vanity or arrogance, but if you look at the facts, very, very few people manage to write anything that might be a best seller. Therefore, I'm lucky by anyone's standards, let alone single mothers' standards."

Rowling says the urge to be a writer came to her early during what she describes as a "dreamy" internal childhood. She began writing stories when she was six. She also read widely, whipping through Ian Fleming at age nine. Sometime later she discovered Jane Austen, whom Rowling calls "my favorite author ever." She was writing a novel for adults when, during a 1990 train ride, "Harry Potter strolled into my head fully formed." For the next five years Rowling worked on Book One and plotted out the whole series, which will consist of seven novels, one for each year Harry spends at Hogwarts. "Those five years really went into creating a whole world. I know far more than the reader will ever need to know about ridiculous details."

Rowling insists that she never consciously set out to write for children, but that working on Harry Potter taught her how easily she could tap into her childhood memories. "I really can, with no difficulty at all, think myself back to 11 years old [Harry's age when the series opens]. You're very powerless, and kids have this whole underworld that to adults is always going to be impenetrable." That's a good description of the social setup she portrays at Hogwarts, where the students have stretches of time with little

or no adult supervision. Rowling believes young people enjoy reading about peers who have a real control over their destiny. "Harry has to make his choices. He has limited access to really caring adults."

Since her characters grow a year older in each book, Rowling says that certain unavoidable changes are in store for them and the readers. A hint of what's ahead appears in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, when Harry notices Cho Chang, the only girl on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. "She was shorter than Harry by about a head, and Harry couldn't help noticing, nervous as he was, that she was extremely pretty. She smiled at Harry as the teams faced each other behind their captains, and he felt a slight lurch in the region of his stomach that he didn't think had anything to do with nerves."

Yes, Rowling acknowledges, Harry is on the brink of adolescence and will fall into that hormonal morass any day now. Harry and friends will notice, and do more than notice, members of the opposite sex, and the action starts in Book Four where they all fall in love with the wrong people. A foolishly smitten or moony Harry may challenge the devotion of the readers who admire his innocent, boyish virtues and unflappable dignity, except, perhaps, those readers who have grown into adolescents themselves.

But Harry Potter fans have something a good deal more worrisome to fret about than potential smooching and hand holding. Rowling has been dropping increasingly pointed promises that the four remaining Harry Potter books will turn darker than the first three. "There will be deaths," she says. "I am writing about someone, Voldemort, who is evil. And rather than make him a pan-

tomime villain, the only way to show how evil it is to take a life is to kill someone the reader cares about." Can she possibly mean (oh!) Hermione, (no!) Ron or (gasp!) Harry himself? Rowling discloses nothing, but she does note that the children who contact her "are always most worried I'm going to kill Ron. It shows how sharp they are. They've watched so many movies where the hero's best friend gets killed."

And certain Potter purists are concerned about Harry's upcoming first appearance on the silver screen. British producer David Heyman saw a blurb on *The Sorcerer's Stone* shortly after its British publication but before the book became a smash. He brought the project to Warner Bros. (like TIME, owned by Time Warner), which optioned the book. The plan is for a live-action film, with Harry played as a British schoolboy. A first script, by Steven Kloves, who wrote and directed *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, is due by the end of the year.

Heyman says Warner Bros. "has already got a lot of calls from parents wanting their kids to be in the movie." But, he says, "the good news is it's not a star-driven film. It's the child's film, and the child is not going to command a \$20 million fee. So the primary cost will be in the special effects. We want to make all of that as believable and fantastical as possible. Technology is now incredible."

But one of the interesting things about Hogwarts in the Potter books is that it contains no technology at all. Light is provided by torches and heat by massive fireplaces. Who needs electricity when you have plenty of wizards and magic wands? Who, for that matter, requires mail pickup and delivery when a squadron of trained owls flies mes-

sages to and from the school? Technology is for Muggles, who rely on contraptions because they cannot imagine the conveniences of magic. Who wouldn't choose a wizard's life?

*--Reported by Elizabeth Gleick/London and  
Andrea Sachs/New York*