

The Story Behind Harry Potter's Magic

By Jocelyn Lund-Wilde

It was July 21, 2007. I had been waiting for this day to come for two years, the day when it was acceptable for me to spend at least 12 hours doing nothing but reading. The seventh, and last, Harry Potter book had come out, and for me, it was the end of years of staying up late to read all about a world where wizards and witches, ghosts and giants, magic and reality, good and evil all coincided. I remember when my mom would spend evening upon evening reading aloud from the first Harry Potter to my brother and me. I was captivated by the story, and even at the age of 19, I haven't lost interest in the vivid fictional world. Harry Potter can appeal to all ages. The question for me has always been: Who could come up with an idea for a book and write in such a way that the story captures the entire world for 10 years? J.K. Rowling has said that Harry Potter jumped into her mind during a train ride, and that the story followed suit, but the truth is that Harry Potter and his world came from a deep connection with her childhood and the experiences that took place in her early life.

Harry Potter is a story of an orphan boy who is left on the doorstep of his aunt Petunia and uncle Vernon Dursley's house. The Dursley's despise Harry and treat him as a burden, while they spoil their own son Dudley. Harry has no clues as to how his own parents died or about his life before the Dursley's, except for a lightning shaped scar on his forehead. When Harry turns eleven, he learns that he is a wizard known for having survived an attack by the dark wizard Lord Voldemort, who killed his parents. Harry is accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and each of the subsequent books takes place during one school year at Hogwarts. On

his first train ride to Hogwarts, Harry befriends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Ron comes from a very poor yet loving family of wizards, and he is a devoted best friend to Harry.

Hermione is known as a “muggle born” because she comes from a family without any magical history. However, Hermione is by far the smartest witch of her year and causes a lot of frustration for Ron and Harry with her never ending intelligence and constant references to books.

The Harry Potter books relate the adventures of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, but also include countless other well-developed characters that influence the story line. Throughout the seven books, Harry seeks to learn more about his past and the connection between him and Lord Voldemort. Harry continually comes face to face with the evil of Voldemort as the dark wizard gains power. With the help of his friends and loved ones, and with the knowledge of what is truly important, Harry overcomes dangers and seeks to destroy the evil that robbed him of his parents.

J.K. Rowling’s parents, like Harry, Ron and Hermione, met on a train. Anne and Pete Rowling met while travelling from Kings Cross Station, London, to Arbroath in Scotland and were married at the age of nineteen (Rowling). On July 31, 1965, when Anne was only twenty years old, she gave birth to Joanne Kathleen (J.K.) Rowling in Cottage Hospital in Yate, England (Rowling). On June 18, 1967, Joanne’s sister Diana (Di) was born in the Rowling’s home (Kirk 12). While they resented being labeled, Di was deemed to be the physically attractive and social sister, while J.K. Rowling was the petite, bushy red haired, freckled, and bespectacled bookworm (Kirk 12). Throughout the Rowling sisters’ early childhood, books were an important part of their lives, and their parents read them fantasies, fairy tales, and classics (Shapiro 23). When Rowling was four, the family moved to Winterbourne outside of Bristol. In Winterbourne, Anne Rowling became friends with her neighbor Ruby Potter. The Potters had two children, Ian and

Vikki, who loved to play witches and wizards and dress up with Di and J.K (Kirk 13). J.K. Rowling has since said that she always liked the name Potter, but that her main character was not based off of the family from her past.

Even before Rowling was in school, she was writing stories and exploring her immense imagination. Di was always willing to listen to Rowling's stories. Since she wouldn't write them down, stories would come out differently each time she told them (Shapiro 25). At age six, Rowling wrote down her first story, called "Rabbit and Miss Bee" (Shapiro 25). When Rowling started school, her teachers were surprised at the level of maturity and creativity in her stories, and this praise gave Rowling confidence (Shapiro 27). In 1974, the Rowling family moved to the West Country near the Forest of Dean, a setting that comes up often in different Harry Potter books (Kirk 28). At the Tutshill Church of England Primary School in West Country, Rowling had a teacher whose personality surfaces in many of the Harry Potter characters who aren't well liked. Mrs. Morgan was Rowling's math teacher, and labeled the left side of the classroom the side for the smartest kids in the class (Kirk 28). Rowling was put furthest to the right in the classroom, which frustrated her because she knew that she was an intelligent person (Kirk 30).

Rowling has admitted to modeling the character Severus Snape after Mrs. Morgan, as well as a few other teachers who used fear as a source of power (Kirk 31). Professor Snape is consistently humiliating Harry in his Potions class and uses fear in general to subdue the class. Rowling made a decision to choose academics over friendships in order to move to the "bright side" of Mrs. Morgan's classroom: "I was promoted to second left. But the promotion was at a cost. Mrs. Morgan made me swap seats with my then best friend. So in one short walk across the room I became clever but unpopular" (Smith 30). Her desire to always have the right answer and to be the smartest one in the class can be seen in the character Hermione Granger, whom she has

admitted to having modeled after her childhood self: “Like Hermione I was obsessed with achieving academically, but this masked a huge insecurity. I think it is very common for plain young girls to feel this way” (Smith 41). However, it is important to note that Hermione grows to understand and truly value friendship and courage in the face of danger in order to help loved ones. Hermione’s transformation from a bossy and academically obsessed individual connects to Rowling’s similar transformation in later life, as she herself began to value relationships with other people.

In the fall of 1976, J.K. Rowling enrolled in the Wyedean Comprehensive Secondary School (Kirk 33). Rowling was insecure about starting a new school, but found her niche with the “quiet, smart, fringes of popular girls” (Kirk 38). In her early years at Wyedean, Rowling encountered many bullies whose personalities appear in the characters Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle (Smith 67). Malfoy (Harry’s bitter enemy) and his followers, Crabbe and Goyle, terrorize Hogwarts’ students; however, Rowling noted that they truly personify school bullies because they are in actuality “cowards at heart” (Smith 67).

In J.K. Rowling’s senior year at Wyedean she met Sean Harris, a new kid at school who would prove to be truly inspirational and the model for Harry’s oldest and most devoted friend, Ron Weasley. The security of a friend helped her to control the emotional side of her life. Sean Harris owned a very old, teal Ford Anglia that symbolized freedom to J.K., because whenever she wanted to escape from issues at school or at home she and Sean would simply take the Ford Anglia for a ride (Smith 77). The importance of the Ford Anglia to Rowling is clear, because it shows up in the second book: Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. In the book, the Ford Anglia belongs to Ron’s dad who likes to play with muggle (nonmagical people) artifacts and who has charmed it to make it fly. Ron and his siblings steal the Ford Anglia from their dad and

use it to take Harry away from the Dursley's over the summer. Then Ron and Harry use it to transport themselves to Hogwarts since a turn of events restricts them from the Hogwarts Express that takes all students to school on the first day. The car also appears toward the end of the book when it saves Harry and Ron from a group of very large and menacing spiders.

J.K. Rowling ended up dedicating Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets to Sean Harris, writing beneath the dedication 'getaway driver and foul weather friend' (Smith 78). The end of Rowling's years at Wyedean were disappointing, as she took exams to get into Oxford but didn't pass and wasn't accepted (Kirk 42). Instead, in the summer of 1983, J.K. Rowling set off to attend Exeter University, where she began to write Harry Potter.

Three years before Rowling went to Exeter, when she was 15, her mother was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). The disease not only devastated her mother, who was 34, but impacted Rowling and her family as well. MS affects the ability of nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord to communicate with each other, and there is still no cure. The disease results in up and down days that lead to "less normal movement than the day before" (Kirk, 40). For Rowling, her mother's battle with MS was the most difficult time of her life: "I think most people believe deep down that their mothers are indestructible; it was a terrible shock to hear that she had an incurable illness" (Rowling). Anne Rowling shared her love of books with her daughters and would always read to them when they were children. The Rowling sisters watched as their mother, who they remember as always being active and engaged in life, struggled to stay on her feet (Living Life). Indeed, Rowling remembers distinctly the speed with which her mother's mobility deteriorated because, when she went to college, her mother was walking unaided and, by the time she was graduating, her mother was in a wheelchair (Living Life). Usually, MS allows for a remission in the illness, but in the case of Anne Rowling the disease only seemed to

progress faster. Rowling found it “particularly difficult to watch her mother’s physical condition deteriorate and be helpless to fight it” (Kirk 40). Then, on New Year’s Eve 1990, at 7:30 AM, J.K. Rowling received a phone call from her father informing her that Anne Rowling had died at the age of 45 after a 10 year battle with MS (Kirk 52). Anne Rowling was cremated and her funeral service was intimate (Kirk 52).

Anne Rowling never knew about Harry Potter, even though Rowling had started writing the first book six months before her mother’s death (Living Life). It is one of J.K. Rowling’s biggest regrets that she never told her mother about Harry (Living Life). However, her mother shows up in Harry Potter’s themes as well as in Harry himself. In the first book, the readers learn that Harry’s mother died trying to save him, and that Harry gained power from his mother’s sacrifice. Indeed, the power of love is a common idea in the Harry Potter novels as it overcomes any evil.

J.K. Rowling’s love for her mother is most clearly demonstrated in the Mirror of Erised chapter in Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, the first Harry Potter book. J.K. Rowling stated the connection between herself and Harry that is evident in this chapter: “When I reread the chapter I saw that I had given Harry lots of my own feelings about my own mother’s death” (Smith 111). The Mirror of Erised shows a person what they desire most in life; for Harry this is his dead mother and father. Harry also spends time talking to his mother in the mirror. Even though she isn’t able to talk back, Harry forms a deep emotional connection just by looking at her. Rowling also wanted people to understand that she wasn’t compelled to write the books in memory of her mother, but her mother’s death lent itself to the central theme of the strength of love between a mother and her child: “Joanne has said that when she reread the first book she

discovered there was a lot of her mother in it... You're just aware of her mother in the background and the way her mother would think about things" (Smith 113).

The story of how Harry Potter came to Rowling originates on a train from Manchester to London. After Rowling graduated from the University of Exeter, she worked in London doing clerical work at different institutions. Rowling was constantly travelling back and forth by train from Manchester, where her boyfriend from Exeter was living, to London, where she was living (Kirk 51). J.K. Rowling says that on one train ride in June of 1990, the character of Harry Potter jumped into her head: "It was after a weekend's flat hunting, when I was traveling back to London on a crowded train that the idea for Harry Potter fell into my head" (Rowling). She didn't have a pen to write her ideas down, so she simply sat on the train and thought through the details: "This scrawny, black haired, bespectacled boy who didn't know he was a wizard became more and more real to me" (Rowling). That same day, when she got back to London, she started to write the first book.

Nine months after Anne Rowling's death, JK moved to Portugal and got a job teaching English. Rowling took her manuscript of Harry Potter with her. In Portugal J.K. Rowling met and married Jorge Arantes. In 1993, she gave birth to a daughter, Jessica, and soon afterwards separated from Arantes and moved to Scotland to be with her sister (J.K. Rowling: From Rags to Riches). Rowling and Jessica lived in government housing and on welfare; it was a dark time for Rowling as she dealt with wanting more for her daughter and her bitter split from Arantes. However, she never stopped writing Harry Potter, and he came to be a means of escape for her. Indeed, her depression spurred her to come up with the dementors, which are creatures that suck all the happiness out of people and promote fear and despair that leave people without any hope and a deadened feeling.

One of the most important aspects to her writing process is that Rowling writes anywhere and anytime; “I remember that I came up with the names of the houses at Hogwarts while flying, and ended up writing them on the back of an aeroplane [sic] sick bag” (Shapiro 270). She is also careful to write notes and biographies of all the characters just so that she knows their backgrounds and can understand them completely: “...the author is the one who must move characters across the page” (Kirk 68). J.K. Rowling would often write in Nicholson’s Café in the early evening when Jessica was asleep. The process was sometimes very tedious since she preferred to write by hand and then type up what she had written. In 1995, when she finally completed her manuscript, she sent the first three chapters to different agents. Many turned the book down, but Christopher Little took interest in the manuscript (Rowling). It took a year for Little to find a publisher, but in August of 1996, Bloomsbury made an offer to publish Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone (Rowling). By 1998, editions of the first book were published in thirty countries and contracts began to flood J.K.’s world (Shapiro, 97).

As of 2008, 400 million copies of Harry Potter books have been sold in 65 different languages (J.K. Rowling: From Rags to Riches). It has also been calculated that every 30 seconds someone somewhere starts to read a Harry Potter book (Smith 269). Along with the books, Harry Potter has become a phenomenon through the sale of associated merchandise and the hit films. J.K. Rowling has become the wealthiest British writer and is the second richest woman in entertainment, behind only Oprah Winfrey (J.K. Rowling: From Rags to Riches). Nevertheless, J.K. Rowling has said that she was happier living with less and is still coming to terms with “the celebrity status that Harry Potter had brought her” (Shapiro 183).

The most amazing thing to J.K. Rowling is that Harry Potter has continued to be a huge success throughout the seven books, and that the passion never seems to die out. J.K. Rowling

feared that she would be a complete failure, and after the first book was not sure she could write the others with “the whole world looking over her shoulder” (Shapiro 97). Yet magic is something that sparks imagination and curiosity in the young and the old. People from around the world connect to J.K. Rowling’s characters and their magical world. J.K. Rowling’s life experiences gave her the background to create the world of Harry Potter that has become important for people of all ages and circumstances.