

The last word

JK ROWLING is the most successful author of her, or probably any other, generation. Now, after finishing her meteoric **Harry Potter series of books**, the world awaits her next move

WORDS BY DAN SAVERY PICTURES BY GETTY

Board any train or flight in the UK and it won't be long before you see a middle-aged businessman reading a Harry Potter book. Whether you're a Harry Potter fan or not, there is no doubting the universal appeal of JK Rowling's work. In the age of 24-hour news, the Internet and reality TV, Joanne Rowling has somehow broken through and made Britain, and indeed the world, excited about reading books again.

But how did she do it? After all, there's no lack of fantasy novels or indeed books about wizards around. So what makes Harry Potter so special? The fan reviews of the final book – *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* – say it all: "JK Rowling amazes me," says Annie Gibbons, 14. "In my opinion this is truly one of the best books I have ever read," Tom Miller, 23. "Even though it took eight hours to read I was never bored with the story," Rachel Esposito, 13. "I was nine when the first book came out, so Harry is part of my life," Saskia, 19.

Whatever the reasons, Harry Potter has captured the hearts and minds of a generation. This summer, *Harry Potter And The Deathly Hallows* broke all sales records by selling over three million copies on its first weekend in the UK. In the weeks preceding its release, there was much speculation in the press and from Internet bloggers on what would be the last word in the book.

In a TV interview with JK Rowling, Jonathon



Ross asked her if the word was 'scar'. Of course, she kept the last word a secret and was infuriated when some American newspapers decided to publish reviews that gave away the ending. "It shows complete disregard of the wishes of literally millions of readers, particularly children," she said at the time. But she must have realised that Harry Potter ceased being specifically for children a long time ago.

Many of the early Potter fans are now of university age (even the boy who played Potter in the films, Daniel Radcliffe, is now 18 years old), and the themes covered in the series became increasingly dark and adult with each instalment. Unlike other children's characters, such as Enid Blyton's Famous Five, Harry Potter does actually get older with each story and has to deal with love, responsibility and bereavement, as we all do.

Finishing the series was a great achievement for Joanne. There were seven books in total, some over 760 pages long! "Actually finishing it was the most remarkable feeling I've ever had," she says. "I was in a hotel room on my own, sobbing my heart out. I downed half a bottle of champagne in one and went home with mascara all over my face. It was really tough."

To say she had mixed feelings about finishing her final Harry Potter book is an understatement. She says she felt euphoric and devastated at the >





ABOVE: JK ROWLING TALKS WITH THE QUEEN AT A CHILDREN'S LITERACY PARTY
 RIGHT: RECEIVING AN HONORARY LAW DEGREE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
 BELOW RIGHT: TWO EXCITED BOYS RIDE ON THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS

same time. "I've been working on it over what I sincerely hope will prove to have been the most turbulent part of my life and that was the constant, and I worked on it so hard for so long," she says. "It's going to leave a massive gap."

But there is life after Harry. At this year's Edinburgh Book Festival, fellow author Ian Rankin hinted that Joanne's next project could be a crime novel. But later he said this was "a joke that got out of hand".

There is also speculation that the author may turn her hand to another fantasy project or even a biography. However, her literary agent, Christopher Little, says all speculation remains just that. "JK Rowling is taking a well-earned break following the English language publication of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*," says Emma Schlesinger, speaking on behalf of Christopher Little, "and there are no firm plans as yet as to what her next book may be."

Joanne has been characteristically coy about her future plans, but has said that she wants to write something "completely different," adding: "I can take my time. And the idea of just wandering off to a café with a notebook and writing and seeing where it takes me for a while is just bliss."

She has been writing like this since she was five or six years old. Her first story, called *Rabbit*, was filled with interesting characters, such as a large bee called Miss Bee.

Joanne Rowling was born on July 31st 1965 in Chipping Sodbury, Gloucestershire. She has one >

WHAT THEY'VE SAID ABOUT JK

"JK Rowling is very descriptive in her writing. She gives an illustrator a lot to work with. Each story is packed full of rich visual descriptions of the atmosphere, the mood, the setting, and all the different creatures and people. She makes it easy for me. The images just develop as I sketch and retrace until it feels right and matches her vision."

Illustrator Mary GrandPré

"JK Rowling's monumental, spellbinding epic, 10 years in the making, is deeply rooted in traditional literature and Hollywood sagas — from the Greek myths to Dickens and Tolkien to Star Wars."

Michiko Kakutani, New York Times

"Jo Rowling set out a sumptuous seven-course meal, carefully prepared, beautifully cooked, and lovingly served out. The kids and adults who fell in love with the series (I among them) savoured every mouthful, from the appetizer to the dessert."

Stephen King.



younger sister, Di, who is a successful lawyer. Her parents were Londoners and met on a train travelling from King's Cross Station. No wonder, then, that Joanne thinks Kings Cross is a romantic place.

She left school in 1983 and went to study French at the University of Exeter. After leaving university she worked in London for Amnesty International, the organisation that campaigns against human rights abuse worldwide.

Then, in 1990, while on a train from Manchester to London, Joanne had the idea for Harry Potter. "To my immense frustration, I didn't have a functioning pen with me," she says, "and I was too shy to ask for one. I spent four hours thinking about what Hogwarts would be like — the most interesting train journey I've ever taken. By the time I got off at King's Cross, many of the characters in the books had already been invented." She began writing the *Philosopher's Stone* that evening.

At the end of 1990, Joanne and her family were devastated by the death of her mother. Nine months later, she decided to get away from it all and moved to Portugal to teach English. There she married and had her daughter, Jessica. The marriage didn't work out, and on her return to the UK in 1994 with Jessica, Joanne settled in Edinburgh, finally finished the book and posted it to some literary agents. The second agent, Christopher Little, spotted the potential and asked to see the rest of the manuscript. "It was far and away the best letter I had ever received in my life, and it was only two sentences long," she says. Many publishers rejected the book, however, until 1996 when Bloomsbury made an offer to publish it and suggested Joanne add a middle initial to her name. She chose that of her grandmother, Kathleen, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Today, JK Rowling lives in Aberfeldy, in Perthshire, with her husband, Dr Neil Murray and her three children. Joanne has always wanted to keep her children out of the media spotlight and recently fought a legal battle against *The Sunday Express* for publishing a photo of her son. In a statement to the press, Joanne and Neil said: "We see no legitimate reason why, as in this case, David, who was less than two years of age at the time, should have his photograph taken and then

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JK: IN HER OWN WORDS

On the idea of Harry Potter

"It was after a weekend's flat-hunting, when I was travelling back to London on my own on a crowded train, that the idea for Harry Potter simply fell into my head"

On the death of her mother

"It was a terrible time. My father, Di and I were devastated... I remember feeling as though there was a paving slab pressing down upon my chest, a literal pain in my heart"

On success

"I don't feel like quite such a waste of space any more"

On Harry Potter merchandise

"If I could have stopped all merchandising I would have done. And twice a year I sit down with Warner Brothers and we have conversations about merchandising and I can only say you should have seen some of the stuff that was stopped!"

On happiness

"I'm happier now I would say than I've ever been in my life"

On her critics

"I am immensely proud of Harry, and I'm never going to disown it, and I promise I am never, ever, ever going to apologise for it. Never. Because I am proud of it and I will defend Harry against all comers"



SEVENTH HEAVEN: THE FINAL HARRY POTTER BOOK BROKE ALL SALES RECORDS IN THE UK AND THE UNITED STATES

published in the press. We take his, and that of his siblings, privacy and safety very seriously."

International fame does come at a price. Lord Byron once said that fame was "the advantage of being known by people of whom you yourself know nothing, and for whom you care as little."

And fame was definitely a shock to Joanne. "I imagined being a famous writer would be like being Jane Austen," she says. "I didn't think they'd rake through my bins, I didn't expect to be photographed on the beach through long lenses. I never dreamt it would impact my daughter's life negatively, which at times it has. It would be churlish to say there's nothing good about being famous; to have a total stranger walk up to you in Safeways and say a number of nice things about your work does put a spring in your step."

Of course, the money helps too. *The Sunday Times* recently estimated Joanne's personal fortune to be £545 million — over a billion US dollars — making her the first woman to become a billionaire from writing. This fortune has been boosted by the merchandise and film rights.

Earlier this year, the fifth film — *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* — was released, leaving two more to come. You can't help thinking that perhaps the films may have influenced Joanne's later books, as the characters are no longer left to the imagination alone. JRR Tolkien was never alive to see his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy brought to life, but JK Rowling has witnessed her characters on screen at the same time as writing the books.

Like Tolkien, Joanne took a lot of her inspiration from ancient words. 'Dumbledore' is an Old English word meaning bumble bee, and 'Hedwig' is a medieval saint. When she was younger she loved CS Lewis' *Narnia* books but says her favourite writer of all time is Jane Austen.

You can be sure that the name JK Rowling will go down in literary legend with the likes of JRR Tolkien and Jane Austen. And fans everywhere are waiting to see what Joanne does next...