



The Harry Potter Phenomenon

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Caroline Horn analyses a rip-roaring publishing success.

When children's writer J K Rowling won The Bookseller Author of the Year Award, beating heavyweight adult authors Sebastian Faulks, Alex Garland and Frank McCourt, it was yet more evidence that Rowling had broken through the unwritten rules that prevent children's authors being taken seriously. Readers of all ages, but especially nine year olds, appear beguiled by her creations. So, what is it about Harry Potter that reaches the parts other contemporary children's fiction does not? Caroline Horn investigates.

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The launch of the third title in the Harry Potter series, **Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban**, has been eagerly awaited by thousands of children, and a considerable number of adults, too. It is unusual for any children's title to attract such a broad spectrum of readers or to be given the level of media attention that its author, J K Rowling, has attracted.

An enticing world

A combination of luck, considered timing by agent Christopher Little, and hard work by publisher Bloomsbury, have contributed to the Harry Potter phenomenon ? but above all, the success is a result of the story itself, and the creation of a world of characters and adventures of which its fans, quite simply, cannot have enough. That can be judged by the print run alone which has spiralled from 7,000 for the first run of **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** to an anticipated 75,000 for UK trade sales of **Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban**, due to be launched on 8th July.

It is hard to believe, then, that a number of publishers and agents turned down the first manuscripts of Harry Potter. Mr Little says: ?I was gobsmacked. I think that people were nervous about its length ? it was 60,000 words while most children's books are 40,000 to 45,000 words. I also think that publishers did not feel its subject matter, going away to school, would appeal to the public.?

While Mr Little knew it would be successful, even he could not foresee just how well Harry Potter would do. ?I think its success comes down to the fact that it is a good story, and its popularity grew as a result of children talking about it. That's it. Wherever in the world Harry Potter goes, it gets the same reaction; it is seen as fresh, new, different. Maybe people were just waiting for something like that?? In the UK, **Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets** managed to outsell many adult bestsellers while in the US, **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** has so far spent 19 weeks on the New York bestseller list.

Timing crucial?

As Christopher Little suggests, the timing of the publication was probably important. Harry Potter reached children's book shelves at a time when support for individual authors, like Jacqueline Wilson, had started to grow while, according to some publishers, loyalty to series was on the wane. In the US, for example, sales of Goosebumps slumped

dramatically in 1997. Traditional series still remain popular among many young readers but the Harry Potter books offer a very different reading experience. Rosamund de la Hey, head of children's marketing at the publisher, Bloomsbury, comments: 'Perhaps there has been a lot of 'dumbing down' in some areas of children's publishing. Harry Potter doesn't do that, it proves that children don't need to be patronised. It has complex plots, fascinating characters and uses good vocabulary. It also appeals to a broad range of readers.'

Children's reaction

Lindsay Fraser, executive director of the Scottish Book Trust, has seen first hand just how children feel about Harry Potter. 'You only have to see how children react to the author to know how they feel about the books. When Jo Rowling talked at the Book Festival in Edinburgh last year, hundreds of children wanted to meet her. When she came into the room, they all just went really quiet, and then burst into applause. They hadn't done that before. And their questions were so in-depth. Jo had a good laugh with them, but she also took their questions seriously. The children have responded to her, and she to them.'

Winning the Smarties

Alongside the influence of the playground, and some very enthusiastic children's booksellers, the extensive media attention and book reviews have also played a part in the growth of sales. Unfortunately, in its early days, media attention focused on the 'single, poor Mum' angle, following the six-figure sale of **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** to the US - but as Harry Potter started to appear on the shortlists of children's book awards, including the Carnegie and Guardian Book Award, the title itself, and what children were saying about it, started to hold the headlines. While sales at this point were doing well, the major breakthrough came when **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** won the Smarties award in November 1997. Sales, says Ms de la Hey, 'went vertical' and Jo Rowling was left stunned by the media clamour.

There is, however, still room for growth says Mr Little, particularly in crossing further into the world of adult readers. The first two titles are available in adult versions and the **Telegraph** will review the new title in its adult pages. But it is the children who continue to hold the focus of attention. To date, Jo Rowling has received some 4,000 letters from her young fans. As they anticipate the next in the series, she is not about to let them down.

Marissa Davis, Head of Junior School, and Pat Williams, Head of the Learning Resource Centre, Ysgol Howell (Howell's School), Llandaff describe Harry's impact on their students.

What is it about the two Harry Potter books by J K Rowling that is so appealing?

Using the words of a ten year old Harry follower, 'With flying cars, mysterious secrets and really original ideas, Harry Potter is a brilliant book which can be read and relished by anyone (yes, including adults).'

J K Rowling's portrayal of Harry's adventures at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is utterly believable and takes the young mind into Harry's world in a totally convincing manner.

Apart from the sheer thrill and enjoyment of reading the first Harry Potter book as one of the Smarties Book Prize shortlisted titles, our Year 6 girls wanted to explore Harry Potter for all it was worth and to delve into the magical realms of analysis from their perspective. Harry became a cult hero overnight and within hours of reading the second book home telephones and faxes were whining with a multitude of ideas being exchanged. The ultimate interview with Harry, an autobiography, reviews, jigsaw puzzles, silk painting, board games, character studies, computer generated posters and fact files were wholeheartedly produced by an excited crowd of girls who just brought Harry alive into their own worlds.

The work culminated in our own showing of 'Harry Potter This Is Your Life'. It was as if the girls not only knew Harry immediately but also almost became Harry knowing every minute detail of his life, his likes, dislikes and every thought.

PW

Very rarely does a teacher find such a stimulus that excites young children into covering so many aspects of the language curriculum from one book and where the children themselves create a range of sophisticated tasks for themselves through sheer enthusiasm. The Harry Potter series is thoroughly recommended as a rich source of cross-curricular opportunities. Its racy style and believable characters totally appeal to children.

Encouraging pupils to read for pleasure is an important role of the school librarian. It is very rewarding to see so many pupils reading the Harry Potter books for sheer enjoyment. They have gained a momentum of their own. Along with novels by such authors as Jacqueline Wilson the Harry Potter books can rarely be found on the library shelves and rather than wait many of our pupils have bought their own copies.

J K Rowling has hit upon a winning formula, which has us all on the edge of our seats. Long may her books continue!

MD

The Harry Potter books:

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, 0 7475 3269 9, £10.99 hbk, 0 7475 3274 5, £4.99 pbk

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, 0 7475 3849 2, £10.99 hbk, 0 7475 3848 4, £4.99 pbk

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, 0 7475 4215 5, £10.99 hbk, 0 7475 4511 1, £4.99 pbk

And on tape: **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone**, read by Stephen Fry, Cover to Cover Cassettes, published 28 October 1999, £19.99 (six cassettes, 8 hours 25 minutes).

Artworks by students of Howell's School, Llandaff.

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