Talking with. . .

J. K. Rowling

by Judy O'Malley

Scholastic

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—J. K. Rowling

On both sides of the Atlantic, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone,* first published in England as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Bloomsbury, 1997), has been garnering prestigious awards, starred reviews, and loyal fans. Joanne Rowling, a former teacher and the author of what will be a series of seven books about Harry Potter, toured the United States in October 1998. During her stay in Chicago, she spoke with me about her purposes in writing these books, the second of which, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, was released in this country in June 1999 by Scholastic and is receiving praise and positive reviews equal to those for the first *Harry.* The third book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, will be published in the United States by Scholastic in fall 1999.

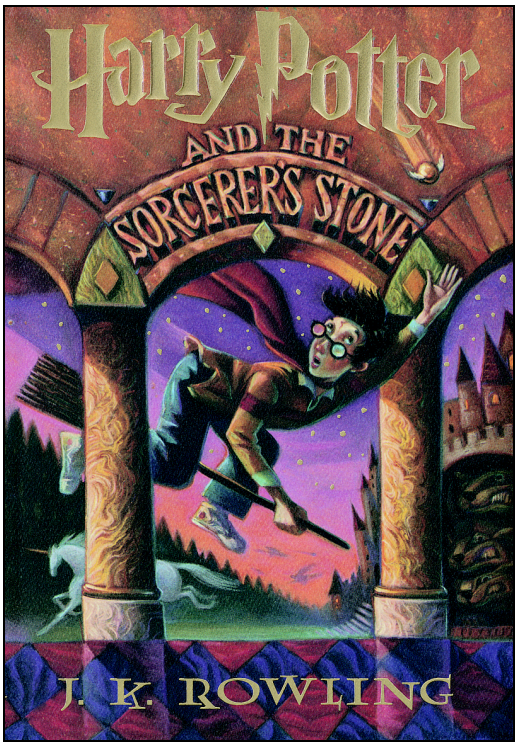
JOM: Were your observations of children and their responses to humor factors in your choice of topics for Harry Potter*?*
ROWLING: I'm often asked if I wrote about this character because I had a daughter or if it came out of my teaching. But I hadn't had my daughter yet when I started these stories, and I wasn't teaching at the time. The kid's point of view comes from my memories of what it was really like to be a kid, rather than a response to what I think that kids might want to read. My sense of humor was called "ruthless" by the English newspaper *The British Guardian.* That took me aback slightly. Some of the humor in the book really is quite black, but then that is suitable for the subject matter when you're talking about ghosts and ferocious creatures.

JOM: In this country, we've recently seen many novels for young people that have been termed "bleak" in their preoccupation with serious personal and social problems. Did you intentionally take another direction with Harry Potter*?*
ROWLING: Yes, that's what I'm trying to do with the books in this series. They could be seen as an

antidote to all of the grim books. There has been the same trend in publishing in Great Britain. We've had a glut of very realistic, gritty, very bleak books. Some of them are brilliantly written and I think it would be a tragedy if they weren't being written. Having said that, though, I don't think *Harry* is an entirely frivolous book. There are difficult things that we see Harry go through—bereavement is a very obvious one—but it's not an "issues" book in the sense that you would sit down after reading it and think about what this book deals with, what it attempts to explain. You see Harry coming to terms with things in his life, and I hope that all of that is integral to the story. But, it's not meant to be the main thrust of the story. And, I think that in a badly written realistic, gritty book that feeling of grinding away at a point is stamped on every page.

JOM: As you've heard from and spoken to American children, do you find they relate as easily to your characters and setting as British readers do?
ROWLING: Apparently they do, and really that doesn't surprise me. Actually, the book takes place in a very different context from even what most English and Scottish children would have experienced. I wasn't educated in boarding school and have no inner knowledge of boarding schools. I was educated at what we call state school, a day school that you would call public school here. So, Hogwarts is obviously a fantastical place. And the idea that children may have to reach a bit to understand what a prefect is really is not that difficult. And, human nature—and kid nature—is universal.

JOM: Were many changes made by your editor in America before the first book was released here?
ROWLING: My American editor, Arthur Levine—who I think is brilliant—and I agreed on this point. We set down ground rules that we would make changes only in cases in which we both thought that what I had written would create an erroneous picture in an American child's mind. Initially, I did think, "I don't want them to change a word." But then, I realized that attitude was akin to expecting French children to all learn English perfectly before they can read my book. We translate this and other books for people who speak other languages and think nothing of it. But, if I use the word *jumper* to mean a sweater, an American child will see Harry wearing something completely different and embarrassing for a boy to wear in this country. So, I don't really feel that I'm selling out my art if I change that word. There are places in the book where if we didn't make changes, the American child would definitely miss the joke or miss the point, while an Italian or French reader wouldn't. The translator would have put the appropriate word right there for them. We really changed very little, but every change was for just that reason: I felt and Arthur felt that without such changes we would be tripping readers up unnecessarily.



Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.* 1998. 320p. Scholastic, $16.95 (0-590-35340-3).

JOM: The title of the first book was also changed from that of the English publication, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. *The substitution of* Sorcerer's Stone *emphasizes the focus on magic and wizardry. Have you had any reactions from parents or other adults who object to the treatment of occult subjects in your books?*
ROWLING: I expected that same reaction in Britain, although from what I've heard in the American media, I don't think there is quite the same degree of anxiety about these things in Britian. If this subject offends people, that isn't what I want to do, but I don't believe in censorship for any age group, and this is what I wanted to write about. The book is really about the power of the imagination. What Harry is learning to do is to develop his full potential. Wizardry is just the analogy I use. If anyone expects it to be a book that seriously advocates learning magic, they will be disappointed. Not least because the author does not believe in magic in that way. What I'm saying is that children have

power and can use it, which may in itself be more threatening to some people than the idea that they would actually learn spells from my book.

JOM: Do you think children consciously pick up on the levels of meaning in the book?
ROWLING: Definitely some do, because I've met them. In fact, I met a boy this morning who asked me the question I had thought everyone would ask me when the book was published, but this was the first time it's come up. He said to me, "If Harry's aunt and uncle hate him so much, why don't they just throw him out?" Well, that's a very shrewd point, and it will only be explained in book five. But, I had expected to have to explain that on a daily basis as the book became popular. I kept wondering why no one had asked, as I would want to know that if I were a reader. So, finally, Dennis in Chicago realized that this was a fundamental question that needs answering. He's right, and he'll find out in book five.

JOM: Did you know from the beginning that Harry Potter *would have to be a series of books?*
ROWLING: Yes, I planned it to be a series from the very start, and when I first met my British editor face-to-face, I knew that, at some point during that first lunch meeting, I would have to say, very tentatively, "Do you think you might want a sequel . . . or two? Because, basically, I have planned seven." Bits of some of them were already written even then, so I kept thinking, please want more. Thank God, after the first course, he turned to me and said, "So, obviously we're thinking sequels." And I was so relieved. I think I said something like, "Well, yes, I think I can probably manage one—or six." And he was fine with that plan. There are a couple of unexplained questions at the end of each of the books, so the story can go on. As I imagine it, there will be seven years at wizard's school, then Harry is a fully qualified wizard and it is then that he's allowed to use magic outside school. So, you'll see him into his final year at Hogwarts. The final chapter of the seventh book is written. That's for my own satisfaction, so that I know where I'm going as I write the other books. And that last chapter deals with what happens to the survivors afterward. Because there will be deaths.

JOM: Harry is very subversive in how he gets back at his terrible relatives. He's a fully developed character, not a victim or saint.
ROWLING: Yes, he wants to get back at Dudley. He's a human boy, and we the readers want him to get back at Dudley. And, in the long term, trust me, he will. But Harry is also innately honorable. He's not a cruel boy. He's competitive, and he's a fighter. He doesn't just lie down and take abuse. But he does have native integrity, which makes him a hero to me. He's a normal boy but with those qualities most of us really admire.

JOM: You must have had an essential belief in this character and his story from the very beginning?
ROWLING: That's true, and it was the first time I really, really believed in something I'd written. Prior to this work, I'd never tried to get anything published because I just knew when I would reread it that it wasn't good enough. But this book I loved more than anything I'd ever done before. I loved the characters so much, they just had to grow up.

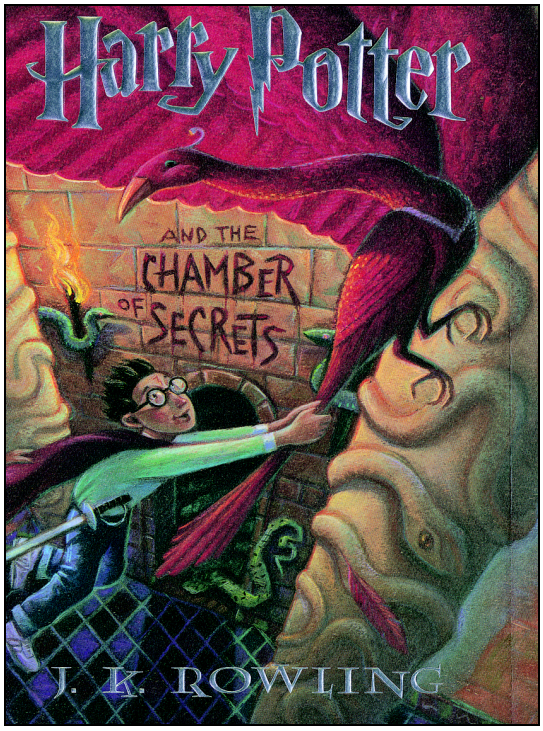
JOM: Did you anticipate that the book would have as much appeal for adults as it does for children?
ROWLING: That was a bit of a shock to me because I'd been writing for adults before and the manuscripts were never publishable. Then, I write what I think is a child's story—although really I wrote it for me, primarily for me. In fact, when I first started writing, I think I was thinking too much about the children who would read it. So, I thought, okay, just write it for yourself. And that was the right decision, because then, as a writer, you can't talk down to your audience. When fan letters started coming in to both publishers, in Britain and in the U.S., many were from adults who weren't even saying, "My daughter read it," but they were saying things like, "I bought it, I read it, I love it. Can I join the fan club?" And those comments

were from a woman who was 60 years old. That was amazing.

JOM: The complexity of the background information in Harry Potter *shows great respect for what the child reader will understand. Are you ever challenged on that point by adults?*
ROWLING: Yes, people often want to know if I think kids get everything in the book. I say, "So what if they don't?" They're getting enough to enjoy it, and if they love the book, they'll read it again. And, if they get a joke on the second reading that they didn't understand the first time through, that's wonderful. It's another treat for them. That's how it was for me with the books I read when I was very young. I certainly didn't understand every word. But then I'd want to reread them when I could get more of the meanings. But, in any case, there are definitely children of just eight or nine who seem to have gotten everything in the book. The proof that we should not underestimate children is all around us, but we still persist in doing it.

JOM: Do children seem to pick up on this emphasis on children gaining their own power and having some control over circumstances?
ROWLING: I think that, in a nutshell, is why they like the book. It deals with a very common fantasy for a lot of children: I must be special. These people cannot be my parents! I think we all go through that to some extent. It's just a normal part of growing up. We all want to be different. And, however happy children are, however well looked after, children are incredibly powerless. Someone else is always calling the shots, whether it be a parent, teacher, or older sibling. So, they love the idea that you can break out of that. That's one reason Hogwarts had to be a boarding school—so the main characters would be mainly with their peers without parental intervention.

JOM: Are you ever surprised by what people find in this book?
ROWLING: I've had some time to stand back from the first book and I can now talk about it far more objectively than I could when I was writing it. I've had various accusations leveled at me. Some people have said that it's very traditional. Now, there are elements in the story that are undoubtedly very traditional. In many children's books, you will find the same basic pattern that occurs in fairy tales. There are good reasons why fairy tales endure. They appeal to us on such a subconscious and emotional level. I think you could say many of the same things about *Harry.* You have the changeling, you have the wicked stepparents (even though one of them is a blood relative, in Harry's case). You even have an ugly brother, in a way. But I certainly did not sit down and think about incorporating all of those elements. It all came from inside. I sweated blood over that story to make it work, but it really came from my heart. Only later can you start analyzing it. But you can overanalyze, too. I had a woman tell me it was clear to her that Harry was so abused that he becomes schizophrenic, and that everything that happens from the point of the arrival of the letters about Hogswart is his own escape into a sort of torture-fantasy. I tried to be polite and say something like, "Well, that would be one way of looking at it, I guess." But I was kind of scared. One of the nicest things about writing for children is that you don't find them deconstructing novels. Either they like it or they don't like it.



Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. 1999. 320p. Scholastic, $16.95 (0-439-06486-4).

JOM: Is it a bit daunting to have had so much popular success with the first book when you know there are six more that will be compared with it and with each other?
ROWLING: Oh, yes. It was terrifying. And people are bound to have favorites. I have my favorite of the Narnia books. And, there's bound to be one of this series that people like less than the others. I can cope with that. But, I still feel like I stepped through the looking glass. I still can't believe the book is published, that I'm sitting here talking with you about it. The scariest moment for me was when the deal with Scholas-

tic came through. I was getting a lot of publicity for the first book in Great Britain, as the book just really took off when I won the Smarties Prize, which is probably the most prestigious English children's book award. So, that gave it a huge jolt, and the profile started being raised. Then, with the sale of the book to Scholastic, too, I just got incredibly scared and was blocked for about a month. I couldn't write at all then, and I went from having been very happy with book two to thinking it wasn't good enough, it didn't match up to the first one. Now, as I stand back from the second book, since it's a year later and I've just finished the third, I think number two is maybe better, in fact, than the first one. It's done very well in Britain and just came out in America. And, I have to say that the American edition of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is my favorite. I've seen six different editions, and I love them all because they are all my book. But the Scholastic cover looks most like the way I had fantasized that the book would look before it was published. To me, it looks magical. It looks like a spell book because of the colors and the style of the illustration.

JOM: Are you thinking yet about what comes after Harry's last book?
ROWLING: I've thought about it. I have a few ideas sitting in my filing cabinet at home. Maybe I'll go back and do something with them, but maybe when I go back to them, I'll find out they're complete rubbish. Harry is my full-time job at the moment. I really don't have much brain space to think about other projects. I don't know if whatever comes next will be for children. But, if I end up being a children's writer, that will be fine for me, because I don't at all see children's literature as substandard or adult books as a peak of achievement. But, equally, if the next idea that enthused me this much were for adults, then I'd do that. The things I'm best at writing are the things I absolutely adore. So, I have to wait for the idea to come. Some writers can take a nutshell idea from a publisher and go away and do that book very well. That's a particular kind of gift that might stray more into journalism. But I know I couldn't do that. The idea has to grip me from the start like Harry did. ■