PRINT

Cash and Harry

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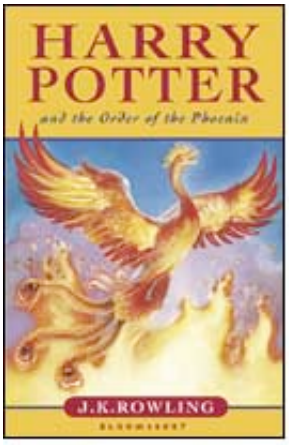
If you haven't caught up with Harry Potter, you're either from another planet or a silly old muggle. Ashley Hay puts on her wizard's hat to explain the global phenomenon.

It's approaching midnight, the clock's about to tick into the longest day of the year in Britain, and 4 Privet Drive is under a haze of night heat, owl feathers and a dangerous residue of potion dust being shaken out of a schoolbag under the cover of darkness. Further north, vaguely in the direction of Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry - if it was the sort of earthly place you could depend on for geography or location - a 37-year-old woman with fairytale golden hair sits in the yard of her house with her second son, looking into the night. Except that her yard is 12 acres of fine Scottish property, and her house is a mansion. Technically, too, the three-month-old baby she has with her is her first son - but for all intents and purposes, she already has a boy making his way in the world. She is J.K. Rowling, and he is Harry Potter.



This is the calm before the biggest rush they've faced, and neither of them could ever have anticipated it. She thought she was just writing seven fantasy books, one for each high-school year, to follow Harry, a young wizard-in-training, his friends Ron and Hermione, and their battle with the evil Lord Voldemort (responsible for killing Harry's parents and scarring a lightning bolt onto his forehead). Harry would hardly have expected to have made her £48m ($118m) last year alone - from books, films (two released, another due next year), merchandising, tie-ins, and foreign rights. They could hardly have expected, between them, to have amassed £280m (£30m more than the Queen) or sold 195 million books in 55 languages to readers in more than 200 countries. Which doesn't include presales for the series' long-anticipated fifth instalment, ***Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix***. A great lump of a book weighing almost a kilogram, it will be released at one minute past midnight on this British summer solstice.

There is no superlative large enough to contain, or explain, their success in the world of books, or the world in general. The one author people mention to give a sense of *Harry*'s scope and scale is Charles Dickens, whose serialised stories drew enormous crowds in the 19th century. But Rowling and Potter - children of an internet age, a mass-marketed age, and an age that simply decided they were what it was looking for - are unprecedented.

For anyone who has been seriously not paying attention for the past few years, here is Harry Potter. Conceived by his author, Joanne Rowling, when she was stuck on a train between Manchester and London, his first volume, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, was written across various stages of her life - as a single mother living in "mouse-infested" flats on benefits, as a teacher, as a recipient of a Scottish Arts Board grant. Hawked around to various publishers

who added to those notoriously famous rejections (including James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Anne Frank's diary), he was finally taken on by Bloomsbury in Britain.

Australian fantasy author Garth Nix can imagine Bloomsbury's decision-makers sitting around in 1997, saying, "Well, we like it, it's got all the features of a good children's fantasy, so the sort of numbers we're looking at ... let's do 500 hardbacks for the libraries and maybe a few thousand paperbacks for the trade ... and everyone will be reasonably happy." Which they did. "One of the things about Harry Potter," says Nix, "is this legend of its first edition."

Hard as it is to get interest for a first-time author, J.K. Rowling went well. Children who read *The Philosopher's Stone* immediately put it among the top five books they'd ever read: early reviews recommended that if parents were to buy or borrow nothing else that summer, they must get a copy of it. Within two months of release, Rowling had attracted a $US100,000 ($151,500) book deal and four film companies were said to be calling. The second book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, followed, according to schedule, in 1998 - the series a year older, Harry a year older, his readers a year older. Then came the third, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, in 1999.

It was around this time that something large began to gather steam. People started talking to each other about *Harry Potter*. It wasn't just young readers, such as Gabriel Borghino, now 13, who read the first book and "showed it to all my friends, or anyone who wanted to read a book" - although there's no doubt that the way kids collect series helped *Harry* along.

"A very, very popular book works among kids by becoming something you want to do to be part of a group," says children's writer Morris Gleitzman. "Some kids would have copies they'd never read. But you've got to have it - and because *Harry Potter* is such a good story, you only have to read the first couple of pages and, even if you're not that confident or motivated a reader, you'll probably be sucked in."

Collecting the cool thing would certainly have been part of it, Nix says, but "it's lasted for more time than that sort of fad". Citing Bloomsbury research in the United Kingom which found that most people buying *Harry Potter* were aged 16 to 35, he says that "breaking out into that much greater audience of adults is part of the reason for its success".

Adds Robin Morrow, one of the judges of this year's Australian Children's Book Council awards: "As soon as we saw adults on trains and buses reading it, we knew Rowling had conquered the world."

For Gleitzman, this links with a theory he developed as adults, "rather guiltily, unless they're a parent or a teacher", told him they'd read his books. And enjoyed them. "For decades, our mainstream culture has been dismissive of childhood and things to do with children. The notion is that if you're going to be a real mover and shaker, you've got to be sophisticated, you've got to be adult, you've got to grow up fast."

Against this "Tarantino effect", he argues, it was inevitable that something would happen in which "childhood could be embraced - if enough people did it - like a sort of coming out".

Along came *Harry*. "It went beyond anything to do with the book to become a social phenomenon," Nix says. "Having read it was more important than anything to do with its content."

Business writer Malcolm Gladwell calls it the "tipping point", when the smallest event runs on through the hugest consequences. It causes a kind of social epidemic - which is what happened to Harry. It is, Nix says dryly, not the sort of thing anyone can either predict or set out to achieve. And in this case, Gleitzman says, "it's probably the only time a kids' book has been discussed at dinner parties in quite that way".

So what makes *Harry* work? For novelist and reviewer Debra Adelaide, "humour is the most attractive aspect - kids love funny books and they have great senses of humour. And isn't it every child's fantasy," she asks, "that they're somehow out of place in their home - that they're a total misfit? Rowling has tapped into those universal themes that people love: the story of a loner, an orphan, out on a quest." On top of which, Gleitzman says, "Harry's a vicariously enviable hero because he finds that without having to work too hard for something, he's got these wonderful abilities".

Harry as hero is also the thing for author Matthew Reilly: "I loved it when, during the fourth book, he went under the lake to save the other competitor's hostage, at the cost of his chances of winning," he says. "That's what heroes do. And guess what - he was actually rewarded for doing it!"

Reilly, like a lot of readers, joined the series around the time of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*'s release: "I'm a frequent visitor to amazon.com, and I kept seeing this series occupying the top three spots on its best-seller list. You don't get to the top of that list without a serious reader following. I decided to see what the fuss was about."

But for all his heroics, "Harry's a very ordinary boy", says Dame Leonie Kramer, the University of Sydney's former vice-chancellor. "He's a bit of a clown at times, not a perfect person. He's irritatingly naughty in school; he does silly things, he tries to do more than he can cope with and always gets a knockback ... that must give young boys some sense of what you can actually do if you've got enough spirit and courage and motivation. It's a good message - and a much better message than the dreary confrontation with real issues like drugs and youth suicide and sex that are around them all the time."

When the 2001 Sydney Writers' Festival was wondering how to get more people to events, Kramer suggested ("really rather frivolously", she says) that it program a *Harry Potter* session, "because it was and still is a very popular thing to talk about".

By 2001, the rise of *Harry Potter* had outgrown everyone's expectations: the fourth book - *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* - had been released at a staggering length of 191,000 words in July 2000, still on track for one book a year. Between them, the four books had won 30 awards, and Rowling had an OBE, an honorary PhD and was number 25 on Forbes' list of powerful celebrities. As sales climbed through their first hundred million (despite the curse of a white witch who claimed Harry was riding his broomstick back-to-front, and wanted the inaccuracy corrected), *Harry Potter* seemed to permeate every part of life.

Washington's Holocaust museum added *The Philosopher's Stone* to an exhibition about book-burning after a group of New Mexican Christ Community Church parishioners burnt *Harry* as "a masterpiece of satanic deception". (The Vatican later gave *Harry* its blessing for helping children "to see the difference between good and evil".)

In the world of pop culture, his famous face turned up on a batch of ecstasy tablets, and one of Rowling's words - *muggle*, meaning non-magical - went into the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This was an honour, several newspapers noted, which J.R.R. Tolkien and Lewis Carroll may have received - but they were both dead before it was conferred.

It's interesting, says writer and political commentator Mungo MacCallum, that because of the way the films came out, comparisons are drawn between *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. "I read Lord of the Rings in the late '50s, early '60s," he says, "and I thought they were terrific then. Now, I'd probably say they have one-dimensional characters, one-dimensional morality."

As for *Harry*, "obviously all the characters there are one-dimensional", he says, "but you'd expect that". He bought the first three books at an airport because he'd "heard so much about the bloody things", and read them - and the fourth one - but he doesn't think Rowling is a terribly good writer. He did enjoy the "wordplay, their oblique references to other legends, but that's a bit like doing a crossword. It's not a good enough reason to read books."

Among people for whom books are always a topic of conversation, there's as little chance of consensus on *Harry Potter* as there is on anything. For a series of books that has sold so many copies and become such a cultural event, many writers haven't read them - maybe because, as several of their publicists and agents say, they won't read in the genre they write in for fear of assimilating some of the style and regurgitating it in their own work, or because they don't have time, or because, like Tom Keneally, they're waiting for their grandchildren to be big enough to read *Harry Potter* with them. Others, such as Melbourne Writers' Festival director Simon Clews, are entirely taken by the series: he has "a stunning set of American hardbacks, as well as the local editions for reading".

In its regular Q&A, *Good Reading* magazine asks a celebrity a month whether they have read *Harry*. For a while, they thought about dropping the question because no one had read the books. The pendulum has swung back a bit: Deborah Mailman, Simone Young, David Wenham and Kerryn Phelps recently came out as *HP* devotees. But Ian Thorpe told the magazine that *HP* was a book he "didn't finish or hadn't enjoyed", and in a Marxist-structuralist discussion of Rowling's work in the French newspaper *Liberation*, Professor Pierre Bruno went so far as to describe Harry himself as "a sexist, neo-conservative autocrat".

Bruno was quoted as part of the publicity for a scholarly work by Andrew Blake, head of cultural studies at King Alfred's College, Winchester, called *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter: Kid-Lit in a Globalised World*. Positing the idea that the *HP* phenomenon was the literary equivalent of fast food, Blake suggested *Harry* was a gift to Tony Blair's New Labour as it tried to reinvent the idea of England. Rowling, Bloomsbury and Warner Bros all threatened legal action, claiming its cover mimicked the style, colour and fonts people associated with both the books and the films. The covers were pulped, and a disclaimer printed on the new design: "Verso is delighted to make it clear this book is not part of the *Harry Potter* series."

And other books were being written to augment *Harry Potter*'s world. Rowling contributed two, one on magical beasts, the other on Quidditch, and an American satirist, Michael Gerber, self-published *Barry Trotter and the Shameless Parody*. It was signed immediately by a US publisher, then a British one, for whom it has sold more than 150,000 copies.

Asked why US authors are so good at fantasy, Rowling said it was because Britain had been

invaded by so many different people. True or not, the use of myth in *HP* is something almost everyone comments on - approvingly or disapprovingly. Where novelist James Bradley sees "a second-hand grab-bag of pieces from old books", Kramer cites Rowling as "reintroducing audiences to some of the most fundamental mythical mes- sages from across the whole of literature."

But something was out of step. It was as if the time-management spell Hermione used in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* to attend several classes at once had somehow spun off-track. With four books published in four years - 1997-2000 - it was 2001, then 2002, then the beginning of 2003, and still no sign of book five. People became very creative about filling the gap. In India and China, enterprising authors took it upon themselves to take up where Rowling had left off. "This creative publisher just decided to fill in the time while Rowling was taking so long," another Indian publisher told the BBC. Rowling's lawyers demanded the books be removed from shelves, leaving her Indian counterpart reportedly "very sad, because he thinks he was doing a rather nice job". In China, the company responsible for publishing fakes was fined £1600, and three men were jailed for up to three years, while Rowling took action in the Netherlands to stop Dutch publication of *Tanya Grotter and the Magic Double Bass*, a book its Russian author Dmitry Yemets claimed, like Michael Gerber's, was a parody. The courts disagreed, ruling in Rowling's favour, although Yement's book remained on sale in Russia, selling 600,000 copies in nine months to Rowling's 1.5 million. In London, Rowling's lawyers said that they were spending more and more time getting fake *Potters* - including pornographic ones - off the web.

More mundane - and legal - were the films: the celluloid version of books one and two had a worldwide gross of $US1.84bn between them, although some fans were sceptical: if teenage-reader Gabriel Borghino could ask Rowling anything in the world, he says, he'd want to know: "What did you really think of the *HP* movies?" The merchandise, too, was a point of contention. It's the only thing that annoys Adelaide: "The marketing, the merchandise, all that crap: nothing annoys me about the books."

On the positive side was the noise bookshops and other publishers created for other books. Anecdotal evidence always suggested that, if there was one good thing about the gargantuan *Potter* phenomenon, it it got children - and adults - reading, and kept them reading. It was a trend to which any author, including Gleitzman, Reilly and Nix, who ended up on the many post-*Harry* recommended reading lists, would testify. "If these millions of readers are awakened to the wonders and rewards of fantasy at 11 or 12," mused Stephen King in *The New York Times*, "well, when they get to age 16 or so, there's this guy called King ..."

In 2001, the Australian Centre for Youth Reading at the State Library of Victoria released its *Young Australians Reading* report on the habits of 10-18 year olds. By then, says manager Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, *Harry* was "a benchmark. He made it a cool and acceptable thing to read - which was especially important for boys." As for the suspicion that its huge sales stripped sales from other titles, recent British figures indicate sales of children's books have risen by 26 million since 1998 which, with *Harry Potter* removed, is an increase of a million books.

Finally, in January, Bloomsbury confirmed that Rowling's fifth manuscript had been delivered: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. It was 255,000 words long - of which only the first

two sentences were revealed. (One group of young fans were so anxious to know what was in the book, they raised £5000 in the hope of buying a postcard in a charity auction on which Rowling had written some clues: "Ron, broom, sacked, house-elf, new, teacher, dies, sorry." It went for £28,680.)

Renowned as media-shy, Rowling would make one appearance - for 4000 children at the Royal Albert Hall - and give a "limited number" of interviews. Not a single copy was to appear until the official release time: one minute past midnight on June 21, the summer solstice, almost three years after *The Goblet of Fire*. Anyone violating the contract would be denied future *HP* sales, and Bloomsbury reserved the right to claim damages.

In Australia, Allen & Unwin, *Harry*'s local hosts, geared up. Between them, Australia and New Zealand have consumed 5.7 million of the first four titles. The print run, vaguely described as "in excess of 600,000", was preceded by an order of 800 tonnes of paper and the appropriation of several different printers. They, along with all the bookshops who ordered copies for the June 21 release, signed Australia's version of the embargo.

Things did have to jostle around to take this young wizard into account. For one thing, where the northern hemisphere's mid-summer is an optimum time to release a book, June is quiet in Australian publishing. Coming at the end of the financial year, it's when booksellers let stock run down before the annual stocktake. Clive Tilsley, of Fuller's in Hobart, ordered 1200 *Phoenixes* - "the biggest pre-order I've ever placed" - and had pre-sold "just about everything" a month before the launch. Further up the numbers scale, Kmart confirmed this book would be the biggest launch it had ever undertaken, while refusing to divulge how many copies it would stock.

At least Australia did well out of its time zone. Midnight in London is 9am in the eastern states - perfect for all the *HP* Day events that small and independent booksellers are organising to persuade people to buy *The Phoenix* from them, at full price, rather than discounted from a department store but with no added extras.

As the clock comes up to midnight on June 21, Rowling says she'll be anxious, as she always is when her books are released. She'll be at home, while the fuss happens somewhere else. Harry may or may not be anxious: he already knows what happens in *Phoenix*. But even he doesn't know what will happen to him after that - or when the series ends.