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J.K. Rowling Strikes Again

'Goblet of Fire' is the Most Intriguing Potter Yet

Elizabeth Michaelson

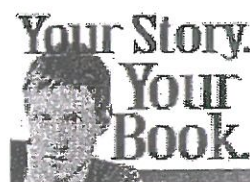
Unless you spent the last year under a rock, you have probably heard of Harry Potter and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. With *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* author J.K. Rowling continues the saga that includes *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Rowling's assertion that Book Four was meant to be different from its predecessors is clear: weighing in at 734 pages, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Scholastic) is much longer than the previous installments. Unlike the three other novels, this book does not open at the home of Harry's "muggle," (non-wizard) relatives, the Dursleys. Most ominously, it ends with the death of a likable



Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire by J.K. Rowling

Many readers could probably predict the plots of the next three books with a reasonable degree of accuracy. This is not a criticism: it takes great talent to make readers



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character, and without an unequivocal triumph for our eponymous hero.

Ominous Voldemort Signs Abound

Part of the series' appeal is the set-up: when Harry was a baby, the evil Lord Voldemort killed Harry's parents and attacked Harry. But the Dark Lord was mysteriously unable to kill him, making Harry the only person to ever survive a murder attempt by Voldemort. Furthermore, the failed attempt resulted in Voldemort losing his powers.

When the series opens, Harry is 11 and famous in a world he knows nothing about. He lives with his muggle relatives, who despise him. But with each book, more is revealed. Lord Voldemort was once a popular student at Hogwarts, Professor Snape hates Harry partly because Harry's father once saved Snape's life. This kind of information does more than enhance the story because readers understand these plot strands as mythological truths.

The atmosphere in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* is tense: the Dark Mark, Lord Voldemort's sign, appears in the sky at the magical and comical Quidditch World Cup (Ireland vs. Bulgaria), wizards are disappearing and Harry is having premonitions about the return of You-Know-Who (as Voldemort is known).

At Hogwarts, students and staff are preparing for the Triwizard Tournament, a contest for select witches and wizards from various schools. Some new characters conform to type: the siren-like Fleur Delacour sports drops consonants and has an arrogant attitude, while the Slavic-sounding Karkaroff has yellow teeth and conveys a Cold War-era menace. With some of the minor characters, Rowling tends toward lively but clichéd depictions—the women are frivolous, the men sinister. But she continues to develop major characters. Harry's friend Hermione has become a force to be reckoned with, while the detestable Professor Snape is becoming more interesting.

Rowling's Archetypes

At best the characters are not stereotypes but archetypes. Readers recognize the legends that drive Harry Potter, from fairy tales to Star Wars. Many readers could probably predict the plots of the next three books with a reasonable degree of accuracy. This is not a criticism: it takes great talent to make readers believe the direction of a story is inevitable. What makes Rowling stand out is the

to make readers believe the direction of a story is inevitable.

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complex symmetry of her plots and her flair for detail. She mixes the comic (during final exams, Rowling wrote in book one, "Professor Flitwick called them one by one into his class to see if they could make a pineapple tapdance across a desk. Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuff-box. Points were given for how pretty the snuff-box was, but taken away if it had whiskers"), the mythical (the magical creatures) and the ingenious (Quidditch, a sport consisting of players on broomsticks chasing various flying balls). Rowling's make-believe world of wizardry mirrors our non magical worlds—it comes with details that give the fantastic events a firm grounding in routine: in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry gets advice on broom models like the Nimbus 2000 series.

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore is the series' main source of wisdom. As he tells Harry in Book One, "Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign ... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection for ever. ..." This metaphor rich lyricism is less prevalent in *The Goblet of Fire*, though ... Dumbledore remains the books' best creation and, I fear, the most vulnerable to the architecture of the series.

While the first books were full of jokes ("Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end of last year to spend more time with his remaining limbs" Dumbledore announces in book three), there is less of the off-the-cuff verbal charm in Book Four, though occasionally ("My own brother, Aberforth, was prosecuted for practicing inappropriate charms on a goat," Dumbledore says at one point) a joke slips by. But a new sense of menace and sorrow pervades *The Goblet of Fire*. I attributed this to the presence of Lord Voldemort, but it was also the knowledge that I had passed the midway point in the series and could look forward to just three more new books about Harry. I wept through the last 100 pages. This was partially because of the death, but mostly because I had realized the sad truth: Harry Potter will not continue forever.

Elizabeth Michaelson is a freelance writer living in New York City.

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