

Harry Potter's magical touch

The worldwide frenzy over the fifth Harry Potter movie and the seventh and final Harry Potter book is only the latest chapter in the greatest success story in the history of publishing. How did a teenage wizard conquer the world?

How many Potter books have been sold?

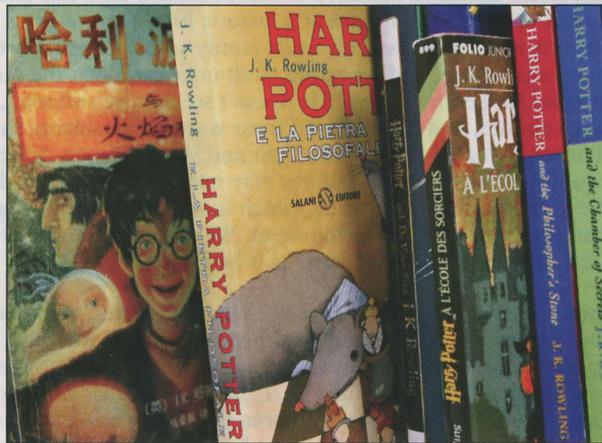
A mind-boggling number. In fact, only the Holy Bible and *The Quotations of Chairman Mao* have more copies in print. The first six books in the series have sold 325 million copies worldwide. The seventh and purportedly final installment, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, which goes on sale at 12:01 a.m. on July 21, will probably add more than 50 million to that total. The series' international popularity has made a billionaire of its once-penniless British author, 41-year-old Joanne Kathleen Rowling, who's worth more than the Queen of England. The series has been translated into 66 languages, including Mandarin (in which our hero's name is rendered as Ha-li Po-te), Lithuanian (Haris Poteris), and Arabic (Hari Butar). The sixth book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, sold 6.9 million copies in the first 24 hours after its release in 2005—more than *The Da Vinci Code* sold in an entire year.

Did anyone expect Harry Potter to be such a hit?

Hardly. A neophyte writer left destitute by a divorce, Rowling shopped her first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, to several London publishers, but was told there was no market for a 300-page book about wizards. Bloomsbury Press, a second-tier publisher of reference books and serious fiction, finally took it on, paying Rowling a \$4,000 advance and advising the single mother to write as J.K. Rowling, on the theory that boys wouldn't read a book by a woman. The first printing, in 1997, was only 500 copies (first editions now sell for upwards of \$40,000). Rowling had modest hopes. "My realistic side had allowed me to think I might get one good review," she told an interviewer. "That was my idea of a peak." She revised her expectations upward when Scholastic paid \$105,000 for the U.S. rights, retitled it *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and scheduled a first printing of 50,000 copies.

Who reads all those books?

Two-thirds of all children in the United States, for starters. So do many of their parents. Of the 121 million Harry Potter books sold in the U.S., nearly half were the adult editions, which carry more sober covers. Kevin Lawrence of Buffalo buys his two young daughters, Megan and Brigid, their own copy of each book as soon as it's published, and allows them to read until 1 a.m. "Then," says Megan, 14, "he comes in, turns off the light, and takes the books. And stays up reading." But millions of books have sold to households that don't have children, and, in fact, the Harry Potter books would be best-sellers even if not a single kid read them. Even the librarian at the U.S. military prison camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, has ordered a copy of the new installment.



Harry's a hero in any language.

How does Harry cast his spell?

Young readers intensely identify with Harry, an orphaned outsider struggling to grow up in a confusing world. Yes, Harry can become invisible and zip through the sky on a souped-up broom, but he and his friends also have the same problems that torment non-magical teens—uncomprehending adults, romantic angst, treacherous friends, inexplicable anger, and dark impulses. As he faces these challenges, Harry discovers hidden powers inside himself—just as all teens do in the process of growing up. In exploring these age-old themes, Rowling borrows heavily from myth and folklore

about monsters, magic, heroism, and mortality. "When something has staying power," says cultural critic Neal Gabler, "it's because it strikes some kind of fundamental chord." Rowling is also a master of building each chapter to a pinnacle of suspense, compelling her readers to keep turning the pages. "The reason I read the books is not because of the magic," says 20-year-old mega-fan Emerson Spartz. "It's a great story with wonderful characters."

What do Potter fans do between installments?

They've created an alternative Harry Potter universe. There are more than 700,000 weblogs devoted to Harry Potter, where fans discuss favorite scenes from the books, speculate on what will happen in the next volume, and write their own stories, called fan fiction, featuring characters from the books. And an entire publishing genre of books about the Potter books has sprung up. *What Will Happen in Harry Potter 7*, by Spartz and his friend Ben Schoen, was a *New York Times* best-seller. Other opportunistic authors have cashed in on the mania with such books as *If Harry Potter Ran General Electric* and *Looking for God in Harry Potter*.

Is everyone wild about Harry?

There are some notable party poopers. British novelist A.S. Byatt said Rowling's books are "written for people whose imaginative lives are confined to TV cartoons." Yale literature professor Harold Bloom says Rowling's prose style is "heavy on cliché and makes no demands upon her readers." Such criticism obviously hasn't dented Potter's popularity. The fifth Potter movie, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, opened last week and promptly broke box-office records, pulling in \$44.8 million on opening day. The four earlier movies have earned more than \$3.5 billion, and Universal Studios is building a Harry Potter theme park in Florida. Rowling has insisted that *Deathly Hallows* is the last Harry Potter book. But we may not have seen the last of the denizens of Hogwarts. "I might do an eighth book for charity," Rowling recently remarked, "a kind of encyclopedia of the [Potter] world so that I could use all the extra material that's not in the books."

No magic for booksellers

Bookstores may pack in huge crowds of fanatics for the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, but unlike the author and the publisher, retailers won't make much money off the book. The Potter series has been surprisingly unprofitable for booksellers because of intense competition to have the best price on the high-profile novels. For the final installment, online retailer Amazon.com has discounted the price to \$18, down from a cover price of \$35, and most big chains are following suit. That means many bookstores will actually lose money for each copy they sell. Some independent booksellers plan to hold the line, selling the book at full price but handing out bonuses like Potter memorabilia and coupons. Others are opting out altogether, preferring to miss out on the frenzy even if it brings customers in the door. "It's the biggest book in history," complains Toronto bookstore owner Ben McNally, "and nobody's going to make any money on it."