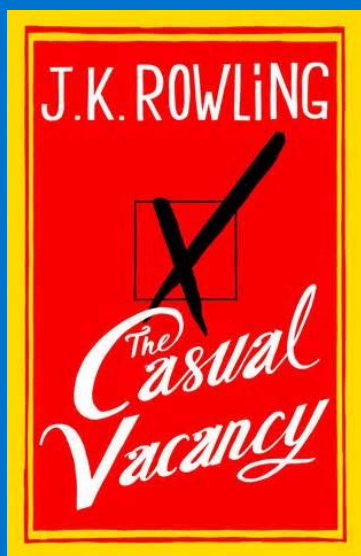


# The Casual Vacancy

## JK Rowling



### Book Summary

#### *The Casual Vacancy*

J.K. Rowling, 2012

Little, Brown & Company

512 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780316228534

When Barry Fairweather dies unexpectedly in his early forties, the little town of Pagford is left in shock.

Pagford is, seemingly, an English idyll, with a cobbled market square and an ancient abbey, but what lies behind the pretty façade is a town at war.

Rich at war with poor, teenagers at war with their parents, wives at war with their husbands, teachers at war with their pupils.... Pagford is not what it first seems.

And the empty seat left by Barry on the town's council soon becomes the catalyst for the biggest war the town has yet seen. Who will triumph in an election fraught with passion, duplicity and unexpected revelations?

Blackly comic, thought-provoking and constantly surprising, *The Casual Vacancy* is J.K. Rowling's first novel for adults.

*(From the publisher.)*

# The Casual Vacancy

## JK Rowling

### Author Background

- Birth—July 31, 1965
- Where—Chipping Sodbury near Bristol, England, UK
- Education—Exeter University
- Awards—3 Nestle Smarties Awards; British Book Award- Children's Book of the Year; British Book Awards- Author of the Year; British Book Awards- Book of the Year.
- Currently—lives in Perthshire, Scotland and London, England.

Joanne "Jo" Rowling, better known under the pen name J. K. Rowling, is a British author known as the creator of the Harry Potter fantasy series, the idea for which was conceived while on a train trip from Manchester to London in 1990. The Potter books have gained worldwide attention, won multiple awards, sold more than 400 million copies, and been the basis for a popular series of films. Rowling is perhaps equally famous for her "rags to riches" life story, in which she progressed from living on welfare to multi-millionaire status within five years. As of March 2010, when its latest world billionaires list was published, *Forbes* estimated Rowling's net worth to be \$1 billion. The 2008 *Sunday Times* Rich List estimated Rowling's fortune at £560 million (\$798 million), ranking her as the twelfth richest woman in Great Britain. *Forbes* ranked Rowling as the forty-eighth most powerful celebrity of 2007, and *Time* magazine named her as a runner-up for its 2007 Person of the Year, noting the social, moral, and political inspiration she has given her fandom. She has become a notable philanthropist, supporting such charities as Comic Relief, One Parent Families, Multiple Sclerosis Society of Great Britain, and the Children's High Level Group.

#### Early years

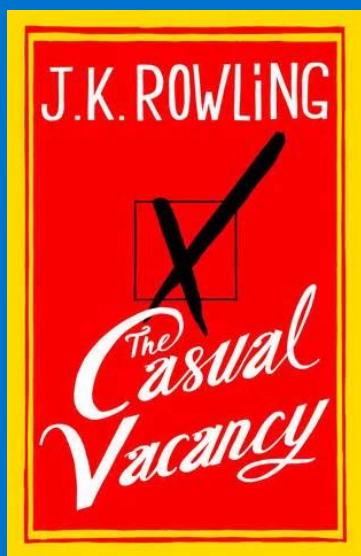
Rowling was born to Peter James Rowling and Anne Rowling (nee Volant), on 31 July 1965 in Yate, Gloucestershire, England, 10 miles (16.1 km) northeast of Bristol. The family moved to the nearby village Winterbourne when Rowling was four. She attended St Michael's Primary School, a school founded by abolitionist William Wilberforce. (The school's headmaster has been suggested as the inspiration for Harry Potter's Albus Dumbledore).

As a child, Rowling often wrote fantasy stories, which she would read to her sister. "I can still remember me telling her a story in which she fell down a rabbit hole and was fed strawberries by the rabbit family inside it. Certainly the first story I ever wrote down (when I was five or six) was about a rabbit called "Rabbit." He got the measles and was visited by his friends, including a giant bee called Miss Bee." When she was a young teenager, her great aunt gave her a very old copy of Jessica Mitford's autobiography, *Hons and Rebels*. Mitford became Rowling's heroine, and Rowling subsequently read all of her books.

She attended secondary school at Wyedean School and College, where her mother, Anne, had worked as a technician in the Science Department. Rowling has said of her adolescence, "Hermione [A bookish, know-it-all Harry Potter character] is loosely based on me. She's a caricature of me when I was eleven, which I'm not particularly proud of." Sean Harris, her best friend in the Upper Sixth owned a turquoise Ford Anglia, which she says inspired the one in her books. "Ron Weasley [Harry Potter's best friend] isn't a living portrait of Sean, but he really is very Sean-ish."

Rowling read for a BA in French and Classics at the University of Exeter. After a year of study in Paris, Rowling moved to London to work as a researcher and bilingual secretary for Amnesty International. In 1990, while she was on a four-hour-delayed train trip from Manchester to London, the idea for a story of a young boy attending a school of wizardry "came fully formed" into her mind. When she had reached her Clapham Junction flat, she began to write immediately. In December of that same year, Rowling's mother died, after a ten-year battle with multiple sclerosis, a death that heavily affected her writing: she introduced much more detail about Harry's loss in the first book, because she knew about how it felt.

Rowling then moved to Porto, Portugal to teach English as a foreign language. While there she married Portuguese television journalist Jorge Arantes in 1992. Their child, Jessica Isabel Rowling Arantes (named after Jessica Mitford), was born in 1993 in Portugal. The couple separated in November 1993. In December 1993, Rowling and her daughter moved to be near her sister in Edinburgh, Scotland. During this period Rowling was diagnosed with clinical depression, which brought her the idea of Dementors, soul-sucking creatures introduced in the third book.



# The Casual Vacancy

## JK Rowling

### Author Background (continued)

After Jessica's birth and the separation from her husband, Rowling had left her teaching job in Portugal. In order to teach in Scotland she would need a postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE), requiring a full-time, year-long course of study. She began this course in August 1995, after completing her first novel while having survived on state welfare support.

She wrote in many cafes, especially Nicolson's Cafe, whenever she could get Jessica to fall asleep. As she stated on the American TV program *A&E Biography*, one of the reasons she wrote in cafes was not because her flat had no heat, but because taking her baby out for a walk was

the best way to make her fall asleep.

#### Harry Potter books

In 1995, Rowling finished her manuscript for *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* on an old manual typewriter. The book was submitted to twelve publishing houses, all of which rejected the manuscript. A year later she was finally given the green light (and a £1500 advance) by Bloomsbury, a small British publishing house in London, England. The decision to publish Rowling's book apparently owes much to Alice Newton, the eight-year-old daughter of Bloomsbury's chairman, who was given the first chapter to review by her father and immediately demanded the next.

Although Bloomsbury agreed to publish the book, her editor Barry Cunningham says that he advised Rowling to get a day job, since she had little chance of making money in children's books. Soon after, in 1997, Rowling received an £8000 grant from the Scottish Arts Council to enable her to continue writing. The following spring, an auction was held in the United States for the rights to publish the novel, and was won by Scholastic Inc., for \$105,000. Rowling has said she "nearly died" when she heard the news.

Harry Potter is now a global brand worth an estimated £7 billion (\$15 billion), and the last four Harry Potter books have consecutively set records as the fastest-selling books in history. The series, totalling 4,195 pages, has been translated, in whole or in part, into 65 languages.

The Harry Potter books have also gained recognition for sparking an interest in reading among the young at a time when children were thought to be abandoning books for computers and television, although the series' overall impact on children's reading habits has been questioned.

#### Life after Harry Potter

Forbes has named Rowling as the first person to become a U.S.-dollar billionaire by writing books, the second-richest female entertainer and the 1,062nd richest person in the world. When first listed as a billionaire by Forbes in 2004, Rowling disputed the calculations and said she had plenty of money, but was not a billionaire. In addition, the 2008 *Sunday Times* Rich List named Rowling the 144th richest person in Britain. In 2001, Rowling purchased a luxurious nineteenth-century estate house, Killiechassie House, on the banks of the River Tay, near Aberfeldy, in Perth and Kinross, Scotland. Rowling also owns a home in Merchiston, Edinburgh, and a £4.5 million (\$9 million) Georgian house in Kensington, West London, (on a street with 24-hour security).

On 26 December 2001, Rowling married Neil Michael Murray (born 30 June 1971), an anaesthetist, in a private ceremony at her Aberfeldy home. Their son was born in 2003 and a daughter in 2005.

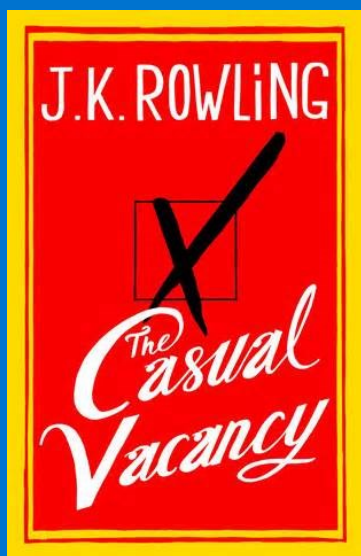
In the UK, Rowling has received honorary degrees from St Andrews University, the University of Edinburgh, Napier University, the University of Exeter and the University of Aberdeen; and in the US, from Harvard. She has been awarded the Légion d'honneur by French President Nicolas Sarkozy. (During the Elysée Palace ceremony, she revealed that her maternal French grandfather had also received the Légion d'honneur for his bravery during World War I.) According to Matt Latimer, a former White House administrator for President George W. Bush, Rowling was turned down for the Presidential Medal of Freedom because administration officials believed that the Harry Potter series promoted witchcraft.

#### Subsequent writing

Rowling has stated that she plans to continue writing, preferably under a pseudonym. In 2012, however, under her own name, she published her first novels for adults, *The Casual Vacancy*. Although she "thinks it's unlikely" that she will write another Harry Potter, an "encyclopedia" of wizarding along with unpublished notes may be published sometime in the future.

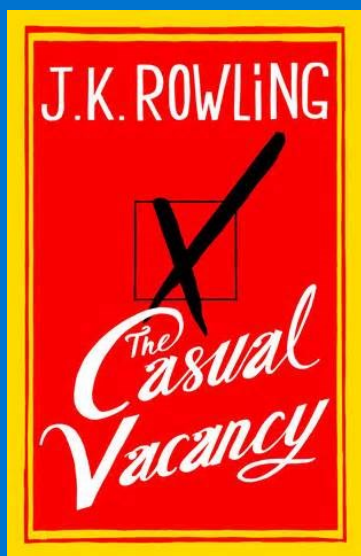
Using the pen name "Robert Galbraith," Rowling published *The Cuckoo's Calling* in 2013. It reached the top of the *New York Times* Best Sellers list within weeks.

(Adapted from Wikipedia.)



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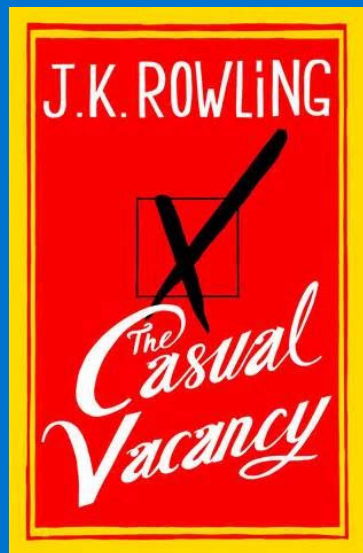
### Discussion Questions

1. Before reading, did you have certain expectations for this book based on the Harry Potter series? If so, does *The Casual Vacancy* meet these expectations?
2. The book has more than 30 main characters. Did you have trouble keeping them and storylines in order?
3. Do you think the profanity, violence and sex is excessive and sensational? Is Rowling trying to prove that she can write for adults or does it enhance the plot?
4. Which storyline with which characters is your favorite and why? Least favorite?
5. Rowling describes the book as a "comic tragedy". What does that mean? Some have talked about the wit, others described the lack of it. Do you find her wit on display in the book?
6. Many reviewers and readers complain that the plot takes is slow to get off the ground and drags in some parts. What do you think? Is *The Casual Vacancy* too long at 500+ pages?
7. Before the success of Harry Potter, Rowling had experiences with poverty. Does knowing this increase the creditability of the Krystal character?
8. In many interviews, Rowling states that she felt she "had to write" this book and that it's very personal to her. Several characters and experiences can be paralalled to her life. For example, Howard Mollinson and Simon Price are her estranged real-life father; Gavin is her first husband; Kay Bawden is a young, single J.K. Do you see any of your own relationships in the book? Does the story cause you to examine any of your relationships?
9. Is the ending satisfying? Does Rowling tie up loose ends or does she leave some things unanswered?

(Questions by Katherine O'Connor of LitLovers <http://www.litlovers.com>)

# The Casual Vacancy

## JK Rowling



### Reviews

*The Casual Vacancy*, Rowling's much-anticipated departure from the genre of children's fantasy, is a sprawling homage to the Victorian protest novel.... Rowling has clearly thought long and felt deeply about the ills of modern society. Her success has given her a platform, and she intends to use it.... At times, though, it feels as if everything Rowling ever wanted to say about anything has been thrown together here, without taking care to determine whether all these ideas detract from or complement one another. Editing occasionally involves saving a novelist from him- or herself.... A thoughtful edit might have removed many of the stylistic slippages. Rowling is at the height of her creative powers: there might have been a good, possibly even great, 300-page social novel inside the 500-page tear-jerker we have instead.

#### ***New York Times Book Review***

An insanely compelling page-turner.... *The Casual Vacancy* is a comedy, but a comedy of the blackest sort, etched with acid and drawn with pitch.... Rowling proves ever dexterous at launching multiple plot lines that roar along simultaneously, never entangling them except when she means to. She did not become the world's bestselling author by accident. She knows down in her bones how to make you keep turning the pages.

#### ***The Daily Beast***

*The Casual Vacancy* is a complete joy to read.... A stunning, brilliant, outrageously gripping and entertaining evocation of British society today.

#### ***The Mirror (UK)***

A study of provincial life, with a large cast and multiple, interlocking plots, drawing inspiration from Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot.... *The Casual Vacancy* immerses the reader in a richly peopled, densely imagined world.... Intelligent, workmanlike, and often funny.

#### ***The Guardian (UK)***

A vivid read with great, memorable characters and a truly emotional payoff.... Rowling captures the humanity in everyone, even if that humanity is not always a pretty sight.

#### ***People***

On the face of it, Rowling's first adult book is very different from the Harry Potter books that made her rich and famous. It's resolutely unmagical: the closest thing to wizardry is the ability to hack into the amateurish Pagford Parish Council Web site. Instead of a battle for worldwide domination, there's a fight over a suddenly empty seat on that Council, the vacancy of the title. Yet despite the lack of invisibility cloaks and pensieves, Pagford isn't so different from Harry's world. There's a massive divide between the haves and the have-nots—the residents of the Fields, the council flats that some want to push off onto a neighboring county council. When Councillor Barry Fairbrother—born in Fields but now a middle-class Pagford—dies suddenly, the fight gets uglier. In tiny Pagford, and at its school, which caters to rich and poor alike, everyone is connected: obstreperous teenager Krystal Weedon, the sole functioning member of her working-class family, hooks up with the middle-class son of her guidance counselor; the social worker watching over Krystal's drug-addled mother dates the law partner of the son of the dead man's fiercest Council rival; Krystal's great-grandmother's doctor was Fairbrother's closest ally; the daughters of the doctor and the social worker work together, along with the best friend of Krystal's hookup; and so on. Rowling is relentlessly competent: all these people and their hatreds and hopes are established and mixed together. Secrets are revealed, relationships twist and break, and the book rolls toward its awful, logical climax with aplomb. As in the Harry Potter books, children make mistakes and join together with a common cause, accompanied here by adults, some malicious, some trying yet failing. Minus the magic, though, good and evil are depressingly human, and while the characters are all well drawn and believable, they aren't much fun.

#### ***Publishers Weekly***