

# No magic wand: How J.K. Rowling became the first billionaire author

By Biography.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.13.19

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Image 1. Author J.K. Rowling attends the U.K. premiere of "Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes Of Grindelwald" at Cineworld Leicester Square on November 13, 2018, in London, England. She wrote the screenplay of the movie. Photo by: John Phillips/Getty Images

In 1990, as she waited on a delayed train bound for London, England, a young woman named Joanne Rowling began musing on the idea of an adolescent boy who attends a school for wizards. This was the very beginning of Harry Potter.

Nevertheless, it would take far more than a magic spell and the wave of a wand for the aspiring author to bring him to life.

## Tragedy, And A Drastic Move

At the time Harry first popped into her head, Rowling was in a confusing place in her life. She had just finished college and wasn't sure yet what she wanted to pursue. She had worked a series of short-term jobs since earning her French degree at the University of Exeter and was looking at a move to Manchester, England, to live with her boyfriend.

Everything abruptly changed at the end of the year when her mother, Anne, lost a decade-plus battle with multiple sclerosis at age 45. Devastated, Rowling sought refuge in the thrill of a new, adventurous life, and moved to Portugal to teach English.

Settling in the coastal city of Porto, Portugal, Rowling scrawled out the beginnings of Harry Potter before spending her evenings teaching. She eventually met and fell in love with aspiring journalist Jorge Arantes.

### **Struggles Of A Single Mom**

Rowling ignored her friends' concerns about the state of their relationship and married Arantes in October 1992. She gave birth to a baby girl, Jessica, the following July.

Meanwhile, Arantes had grown increasingly abusive. The final straw came with an ugly fight in November 1993, when Arantes harshly slapped his wife and threw her out of the home without Jessica. Rowling soon returned with the police to take her daughter, and within weeks they were on a plane back to the United Kingdom (U.K.), along with the first three chapters of Harry Potter.

After spending the holidays at the Edinburgh, Scotland, home of her sister and brother-in-law, Rowling applied for government benefits that helped her secure a small apartment and weekly money for living expenses. She grudgingly accepted a friend's loan for a deposit on a more welcoming apartment. Then Rowling began spending her days at her brother-in-law's café with Jessica by her side, as she continued the long march through her manuscript.



### **"As Poor As It Is Possible To Be"**

Barely getting by with the help of friends and family – "as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless," she later described it – Rowling found herself increasingly in despair. She was angry over her failures and felt guilty about her inability to provide for her daughter. As a reminder of her missteps, Arantes showed up in an attempt to get back together, though he retreated after Rowling obtained a restraining order.

Finding it almost unbearable to face so many challenges in her life, Rowling struggled with thoughts of suicide. Taking her own life felt like a solution at the time but she realized she wanted to work through her problems for the sake of her daughter, if no one else. She began seeing a mental health counselor and when her outlook improved with therapy she set her sights on a one-year teaching training course. Still, there was the matter of unfinished business with the boy wizard who occasionally flew through her imagination.

### **Harry Potter To The Rescue**

Upon completing her manuscript in 1995, Rowling followed through with the plan for teachers' certification while hunting down literary representation. A three-chapter sample of Harry Potter was enough to reel in the London agent Christopher Little. Still, publishing houses seemed largely immune to the magic of Harry, Ron, Hermione and company.

Following a dozen rejections, Little finally found a taker in London publishing house Bloomsbury, which offered a £1,500 advance. This payment, which comes before a book is published, was equal to around \$2,400 in U.S. dollars at that time. Rowling also snagged an £8,000 grant from the Scottish Arts Council, or about \$12,800 dollars. This payment helped her buy a brand-new typewriter and finish a Harry Potter sequel.

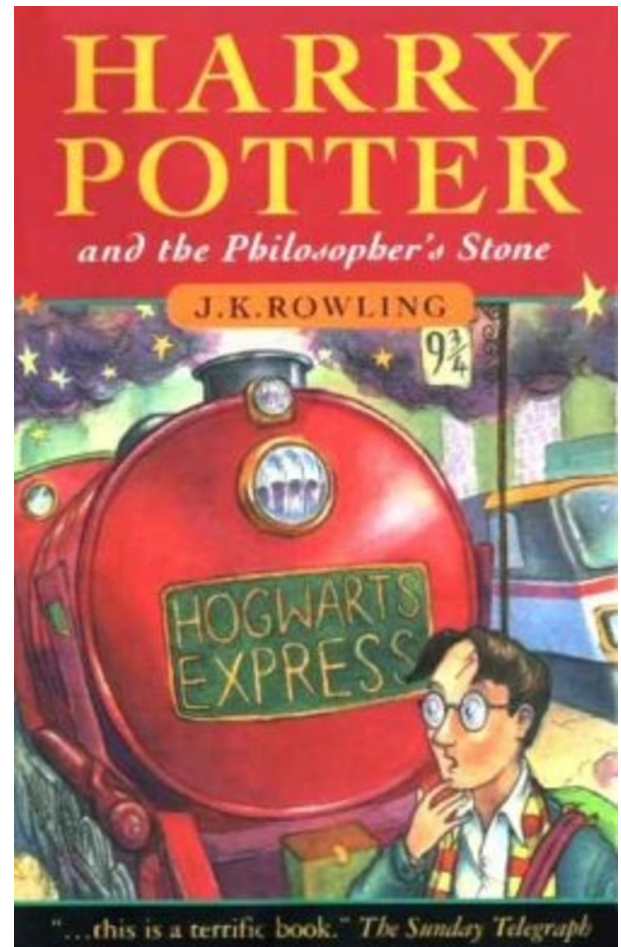
On June 26, 1997, the author saw her hard work pay off with the publication of "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" in the U.K. She was now known as J.K. Rowling because of concerns about how boys would respond to a female writer, but the name change was fitting in that her life of privacy was about to end.

### **Hooray For Hollywood!**

Within days of Harry's debut, children's publishing powerhouse Scholastic had bid more than \$100,000 for the American publishing rights. Scholastic renamed the book "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." The highly successful sequel, "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets," followed a year later. By the fall of 1998, Warner Bros. was on board with a feature film deal.

The rest reads like a fairy tale. Rowling was a billionaire by 2004 when Hollywood was still only halfway through eight Harry Potter films and well before the launch of another cash-cow series, *Fantastic Beasts*. She also found love again, with Scottish doctor Neil Murray, and continued churning out bestsellers on the strength of her name and addictive stories.

Rowling's life looks charmed from the outside. However, she faced many struggles early on, and failed more than once when trying to get her first book published. Luckily for all Harry Potter fans, she never gave up.



## Quiz

1 Read the following statement.

*Few people know that Rowling's success did not come easy.*

Which sentence from the article BEST supports the statement above?

- (A) Nevertheless, it would take far more than a magic spell and the wave of a wand for the aspiring author to bring him to life.
- (B) Meanwhile, Arantes had grown increasingly abusive.
- (C) Barely getting by with the help of friends and family – "as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless," she later described it – Rowling found herself increasingly in despair.
- (D) Rowling's life looks charmed from the outside.

2 Read the paragraph from the section "Harry Potter To The Rescue."

*On June 26, 1997, the author saw her hard work pay off with the publication of "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" in the U.K. She was now known as J.K. Rowling because of concerns about how boys would respond to a female writer, but the name change was fitting in that her life of privacy was about to end.*

Which of the following can be inferred from the paragraph above?

- (A) Rowling suggested the name change because she wanted boys to understand her book.
- (B) Rowling was willing to have her name changed if it meant that boys would read her book.
- (C) Rowling agreed to the name change because she wanted to be a more private person.
- (D) Rowling agreed to the name change because she anticipated that her privacy was going to end.

3 How do the first and final paragraphs of the article relate to each other?

- (A) The first paragraph describes how Rowling first had the idea of Harry Potter, and the final paragraph explains how she got ideas for subsequent Harry Potter books.
- (B) The first paragraph describes how Rowling conceived the idea of Harry Potter, and the final paragraph explains how that idea evolved over time.
- (C) The first paragraph describes how Rowling conceived the first Harry Potter book, and the final paragraph reviews what she had to endure to bring the book to fruition.
- (D) The first paragraph describes how a train problem led to Rowling musing about Harry Potter, and the final paragraph explains how that problem was eventually solved.

*Rowling soon returned – with a police presence – to take her daughter, and within weeks they were on a plane back to the United Kingdom (U.K.), along with the first three chapters of Harry Potter.*

*Then Rowling began spending her days at her brother-in-law's café with Jessica by her side, as she continued the long march through her manuscript.*

Which option BEST describes how the sentences help develop a central idea of the article?

- (A) They both show that Rowling was very clever at finding ways to solve difficult problems.
- (B) They both show that Rowling was greatly affected by terrible tragedies that occurred in her life.
- (C) They both show that Rowling asked others for help so she could work on her Potter book.
- (D) They both show that Rowling worked on her Potter manuscript even during challenging times.