

# J. K. Rowling: By the Book

OCT. 11, 2012

*The author of Harry Potter and, now, "The Casual Vacancy," says her favorite literary character is Jo March: "It is hard to overstate what she meant to a small, plain girl called Jo."*

## **What's the best book you read this summer?**

I loved "The Song of Achilles," by Madeline Miller.

## **What was the last truly great book you read?**

"Team of Rivals," by Doris Kearns Goodwin. I lived in it the way that you do with truly great books; putting it down with glazed eyes and feeling disconcerted to find yourself in the 21st century. I met the author at a reception in the American Embassy in London last year, and I was so excited that I was bobbing up and down on the spot like a 5-year-old.

## **Any literary genre you simply can't be bothered with?**

"Can't be bothered with" isn't a phrase I'd use, because my reading tastes are pretty catholic. I don't read "chick lit," fantasy or science fiction but I'll give any book a chance if it's lying there and I've got half an hour to kill. With all of their

benefits, and there are many, one of the things I regret about e-books is that they have taken away the necessity of trawling foreign bookshops or the shelves of holiday houses to find something to read. I've come across gems and stinkers that way, and both can be fun.

On the subject of literary genres, I've always felt that my response to poetry is inadequate. I'd love to be the kind of person that drifts off into the garden with a slim volume of Elizabethan verse or a sheaf of haikus, but my passion is story. Every now and then I read a poem that does touch something in me, but I never turn to poetry for solace or pleasure in the way that I throw myself into prose.

### **What was the last book that made you cry?**

The honest answer is “The Casual Vacancy.” I bawled while writing the ending, while rereading it and when editing it.

### **The last book that made you laugh?**

“The Diaries of Auberon Waugh.” It’s in my bathroom, and it’s always good for a giggle.

### **The last book that made you furious?**

As Margaret Thatcher might say, I don’t wish to give it the oxygen of publicity.

### **If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be? The prime minister?**

The president’s already read “Team of Rivals,” and I can’t think of anything better for him. I’d give our prime minister “Justice,” by Michael Sandel.

### **What were your favorite books as a child?**

“The Little White Horse,” by Elizabeth Goudge; “Little Women,” by Louisa May Alcott; “Manxmouse,” by Paul Gallico; everything by Noel Streatfeild; everything by E. Nesbit; “Black Beauty,” by Anna Sewell (indeed, anything with a horse in it).

### **Did you have a favorite character or hero as a child? Do you have a literary hero as an adult?**

My favorite literary heroine is Jo March. It is hard to overstate what she meant to a small, plain girl called Jo, who had a hot temper and a burning ambition to be a writer.

### **What’s the best book your mother ever gave or read to you?**

She gave me virtually all the books mentioned above. My most vivid memory of being read to is my father reading “The Wind in the Willows” when I was around 4 and suffering from the measles. In fact, that’s all I remember about having the measles: Ratty, Mole and Badger.

**What books have your own children introduced you to recently? Or you to them?**

My son introduced me to Cressida Cowell's dragon books, which are so good and funny. My younger daughter is pony mad, so we're halfway through a box set by Pippa Funnell. I recently started pressing Kurt Vonnegut Jr. on my elder daughter, who is a scientist.

**If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know?**

I took this question so seriously I lost hours to it. I went through all of my favorite writers, discarding them for various reasons: P. G. Wodehouse, for instance, was so shy that it might be a very awkward meeting. Judging by his letters, his main interests were Pekingese dogs and writing methodology. As I don't own a Peke I've got a feeling we'd just discuss laptops rather than exploring the secrets of his genius.

I finally narrowed the field to two: Colette and Dickens. If Colette were prepared to talk freely, it would be the meeting of a lifetime because she led such an incredible life (her biography, "Secrets of the Flesh," by Judith Thurman, is one of my all-time favorites). By the narrowest of margins, though, I think I'd meet Dickens. What would I want to know? Everything.

**Do you remember the best fan letter you ever received? What made it special?**

There have been so many extraordinary fan letters, but I'm going to have to say it was the first one I ever received, from a young girl called Francesca Gray. It meant the world to me.

**So many children's books today try to compare themselves to Harry Potter. If your new book, "The Casual Vacancy," were to be compared to another book, author or series in your dream book review, what would it be?**

"The Casual Vacancy" consciously harked back to the 19th-century traditions of Trollope, Dickens and Gaskell; an analysis of a small, literally parochial society. Any review that made reference to any of those writers would delight me.

**Of the books you've written, which is your favorite?**

My heart is divided three ways: "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone," "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" and "The Casual Vacancy."

**There's a whole publishing sub-industry of books about Harry Potter. Have you read any of them, or any of the scholarly articles devoted to the books?**

No, except for two pages of a book claiming to reveal the Christian subtext. It convinced me that I ought not to read any others.

**What's the one book you wish someone else would write?**

"The Playboy of the Western World," the second volume of Nigel Hamilton's biography of J.F.K. and sequel to "Reckless Youth."

**If you could bring only three books to a desert island, which would you pack?**

Collected works of Shakespeare (not cheating — I've got a single volume of them); collected works of P. G. Wodehouse (two volumes, but I'm sure I could find one); collected works of Colette.

**If you could be any character from literature, who would it be?**

Elizabeth Bennet, naturally.

**What was the last book you just couldn't finish?**

"Armada," by Wilkie Collins. Having loved "The Woman in White" and "The Moonstone," I took it on tour with me to the United States in 2007 anticipating a real treat. The implausibility of the plot was so exasperating that I abandoned it mid-read, something I hardly ever do.

**What do you plan to read next?**

There are three books that I need to read for research sitting on my desk, but for pleasure, because I love a good whodunit and she's a master, I'm going to read "The Vanishing Point" by Val McDermid.