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Media

August 22, 2006

Save Harry!

Harry Potter fans are traumatized by hints he may be killed off in the final book of the series

PATRICIA TREBLE

For what it's worth -- and nerve-racked Harry Potter fans seem willing to bask in any ray of hope -- Emerson Spartz refuses to buy the doom and gloom surrounding the future of the world's most famous fictional wizard. "There's a zero per cent chance that Harry is going to die," prophesies the founder of *MuggleNet.com*. Spartz, of course, doesn't know any more than anyone else, but he's sure that author J.K. Rowling wouldn't have plotted her series around a "kid whose life sucks and then he dies."

But for every optimist there's a worrier. Melissa Anelli, webmaster for the Leaky Cauldron site, "knows in my heart that he will live," but still has a terrible fear that Rowling will do the unthinkable. "If anyone can pull [Harry's death] off, she can." Anelli isn't alone: earlier this month John Irving -- no fan of happy endings in his own novels -- confessed his "fingers are crossed for Harry," while horror maestro Stephen King urged Rowling to be "fair" to her hero because he doesn't "want him to go over the Reichenbach Falls" like Sherlock Holmes.

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For the seventh, final and still untitled Harry Potter book, anxiety started rising on June 26, when the ultra-private Rowling appeared on the popular British literary TV show *Richard & Judy*. She stunned a spellbound audience of children by revealing that the final chapter -- written long ago -- had recently "changed very slightly: one character got a reprieve, but two die that I didn't intend to die." Significant characters? "We are dealing with pure evil. So they don't target the extras, do they? They go straight for the main characters . . . or I do." Then the bombshell about Harry. "I can completely understand the mentality of an author who thinks, 'I'm going to kill him off because after I'm dead and gone they won't be able to bring back the character.' "

Fans are on edge because Rowling has a history of terrible but accurate hints. Prior to the 2005 release of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the Scottish author warned that a major character would die, and she delivered. Tears dampened tens of millions of books when Severus Snape killed beloved Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore with the "Avada Kedavra" curse. So within hours of her British appearance, fan websites were dissecting video clips and transcripts with a zeal normally reserved for analysts parsing central bank economic comments -- would she really kill Harry? If two characters whom she'd previously expected to live were doomed -- and she described that as a slight change -- just how many die in total? In no time, the media jumped on her words: "Harry Potter must die," screamed a *Guardian* headline.

That so many people are so concerned about a character in a novel still being written -- and unlikely to be published until perhaps, as some have speculated, 7/7/07 -- reveals that this isn't just any book. It's the finale of a series that has sold more than 300 million copies worldwide (even though some critics have panned the books as wordy and poorly edited). The novels have persuaded millions of kids to dive into a magical world of Blast-Ended Skrewts, Quidditch, Horcruxes and a teenaged orphan named Harry Potter who has repeatedly confronted Voldemort, the darkest wizard of his time and the man who killed his parents.

Philip Nel, an English professor at Kansas State University, likens the fuss to that which befell a Dickens classic. In 1841, American fans desperate for the latest serialized chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop* greeted arriving British ships with the question, "Is Little Nell dead?" (She was.) When Rowling, King and Irving held charity readings in New York City earlier this month, she responded to a shouted "Don't kill Harry" with "Oh, no pressure then." Despite this, Nel, who teaches a sold-out "Harry Potter's Library" course, believes Rowling is unlikely to be influenced by fans or marketers because she has plotted the entire series down to the smallest detail. Having to annually re-read the series for his course helps Nel understand why it's so popular -- Rowling's detailed magical world is full of characters that people find themselves emotionally connected to, such as Neville Longbottom, bullied throughout his childhood by his domineering grandmother.

With no publication date in site, anything Harry-related becomes news. Warner Bros. announced *The Half-Blood Prince* will be in theatres on Nov. 21, 2008 -- once they find a director, sign up the cast and start filming. Scholastic, Rowling's American publisher, released a study showing that half of young Harry Potter readers didn't read for fun before cracking open

the books. Online bookseller *Abebooks.com* joined the act, with a survey showing that one in five avid readers expect a leak to spoil the ending of book seven. And on July 1, adult fans descended on Las Vegas for Lumos 2006: A Harry Potter Symposium, forsaking casinos for lectures such as "Of Dementors, Dark Lords and Depression: A Study of Mental Illness in Harry Potter." (Next year's conference will be in Toronto.)

For most Potter fans, though, with Rowling again silent, all they can do is fret and speculate. Rereading the series for clues -- do the mysterious initials "R.A.B." refer to Sirius Black's brother Regulus, and why does everyone say Harry has his mother's eyes? -- keeps devotees occupied, at least for a while. Websites such as the Leaky Cauldron and *MuggleNet.com*, usually quiet in a year with no new books or movies, are finding their visitor stats climbing as Harry addicts come to absorb fan-written articles such as "The Mystery of the Stupefied Death Eater," or add to the seemingly endless list of loose ends everyone expects Rowling to finally tidy up.

Whenever the opus is published, Jasper, Ont., teacher and Potter fan Brenda Wiltsie-Brown will crack it open at the same time as her two children, Ellen, 14, and Aden, 17. All intend to savour the last Harry Potter novel, vowing not to flip to the end. Wiltsie-Brown isn't too worried that her kids, both avid readers, will be upset by the plot. But if tears flow, she'll wait until everyone has finished the book and then, emphasizing it's a work of fiction, discuss Rowling's decisions. As for anyone who leaks plot details? Aden is pushing for jail time.

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