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★ J.K. Rowling, Britain
Turning Fear Into Magic

By [AMANDA RIPLEY](#)

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The fears of children are prodigious, like the inky void that opens up after dark where the closet used to be. But their most rational fear may be that of growing up, becoming another self-important soldier among the hordes of ashen-faced adults, following rules that are bereft of magic and spark.

Becoming a Dursley. Becoming a *muggle*. For all the achievements

J.K. Rowling can claim, her fundamental triumph is that she never grew up. She has held onto her crackling imagination, gripped it white-knuckled through grief, divorce and welfare. The results are the four Harry Potter books (with the fifth due June 21) that mesmerized a generation and restored reading to its rightful throne; that have been translated into 55 languages, and have catapulted Rowling from the dole to a net worth of \$350 million.

Even now, with a \$3 million mansion, a recent marriage and a new baby boy, Rowling's eyes remain wide with wonder. She still insists children are "grossly underestimated" and, given a choice, prefers their company. Over the years, she has made a habit of quietly



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Bill Church, nominating French foreign minister DOMINIQUE DE VILLEPIN

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corresponding with a handful of terminally ill children. She writes e-mails, sends stuffed animals and whispers hints of what is to come in the next book. These children are, in fact, the only ones who ever know anything about the books in advance.

“ I am crying so hard as I type. She left footprints on my heart all right.”

— J.K. ROWLING

"Talking to adults scares me," Rowling e-mailed Catie Hoch, who was 8 years old and fighting cancer. "I don't mind talking to big groups of people your age at all, because you ask interesting questions." Like an amiable 12-year-old, Rowling chatted about both the thrilling — "GUESS WHO I MET IN WASHINGTON? None other than your President" — and the mundane — "I've just remembered I haven't fed the rabbit and the guinea pig." And e-mailing back from Albany, New York., Hoch shared stories about her Harry Potter birthday party and only rarely alluded to the seven rounds of chemotherapy, the three lung operations or the removal of three-quarters of her liver.

When Hoch's cancer spread to her brain, leaving her too weak to e-mail, Rowling called and read her chunks from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, which had not yet been released. After Hoch died in May 2000, Rowling e-mailed her parents. "I consider myself privileged to have had contact with Catie ... I am crying so hard as I type. She left footprints on my heart all right." Late last year, Rowling sent an unsolicited \$100,000 check to the Catie Hoch Foundation. She has never spoken publicly about Hoch or about the sick boy from South Wales whom Rowling had over for tea, or the e-mail pal in Boston who died before he reached his teens. Exploiting such small favors would not occur to a woman who signs her e-mails to kids with a string of 24 kisses and the words, "J.K. Rowling (Jo to anybody in Gryffindor)."

Reported by Amanda Bower/Alban

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