



Inquiries: Pamela Wallin, Box 581, Wadena, Saskatchewan, S0A 4J0 | pamela.wallin@gmail.com | 306-338-9045

Chapters And Verse

When Harry Meets The Baudelaires

As the world goes bananas over the latest Harry Potter book, a rival for the affections of the world's kids has emerged. The stories of the Baudelaire orphans have been leaping off bookshelves, as young readers devour weird tales inspired by gothic novels, Victorian dramas, Monty Python and the author's memories of schoolyard bullies.

Lemony Snicket (a.k.a. Daniel Handler) warns his readers NOT to choose his books if they are in the mood for a pleasant experience. "If this is the case, I advise you to put this book down instantaneously", says Snicket, reminding readers that disaster and misfortune already define the unhappy lives of the orphans. Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* charts the history of Violet, Klaus and Sunny as they confront terrible accidents and unpleasanties such as a giant pincher machine, hungry leeches, murderous relatives and a man with a cloud of smoke where his head should be. It is, as one young reader suggested, Harry Potter from hell.

Unlike the almost reclusive creator of Harry Potter, J.K. Rowling, Handler loves to meet the public and his pint sized readership. He conspiratorially describes himself as an "associate" of Lemony Snicket and inexplicably, Handler often plays the accordion at his readings. The thirtysomething author of two adult novels dismisses the criticism of his dark and twisted humour, saying he feels no personal responsibility for the welfare of fictional characters. "Besides," Handler adds, "There is always something hysterically funny about abject misery."

Handler dreamed up the orphan saga late one night after too much whiskey with Susan Rich, a friend from Winnipeg, who is now an editor at HarperCollins in New York. Handler says he can't believe HarperCollins thinks the content is suitable for children but perhaps the bottom line has made them more accepting. The books attract even adults to the cult following and are hot sellers, with 100,000 copies sold worldwide and we're only at Book Five in a thirteen part series. (Book Six, *The Austere Academy*, is due out in August!) Still, it's hard to match the Potter phenomenon.

The British publisher kept the title of the latest installment secret, strategically leaking the name Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire just a week before it's publication. This hype only fueled the feverish demand.

The Canadian publisher, Raincoast Books of Vancouver –whose finances are now in the black because of Harry- confirmed it would use the British title (The Americans sometimes have their own names for their versions of Harry). The Canadian printer of the book -- Friesen Printers in Altona, Manitoba -- has run off 300,000 copies of the book under security fit for a federal budget. The Brits have printed 1.5 million copies, a record first run for any book. This is the fourth book in the series of 7 (that will end when Harry turn 17 and leaves Hogwarts) and there are already one million copies of the first three in print in this country alone. The 35-year-old author is ranked by Forbes magazine as the 24th highest celebrity earner in the world , just after Michael Jordon. Rowling made \$58 million in 1999, and will add \$190 million this year (same league as Oprah, and it's a similar rags to riches story -- single mother, suffered from depression, wrote during breaks from her job as a schoolteacher, etc., etc.)

If Rowling has hit the literary jackpot with the books, it will pale when the movie hits the screen. Chris Columbus, director of the first two Home Alone movies and Mrs. Doubtfire has signed to make the first film based on Potter books – it starts shooting this summer. Dame Maggie Smith has been approached to play deputy headmistress Minerva McGonagall. The star of Sixth Sense, 12 year old Haley Joel Osment wanted the part of Harry, but the author wants an unknown British boy to play the part.

Rowling has become a powerful force controlling media access and marketing. Even the critics are criticized when they accused Rowling of “dumbing down” kid lit. While you may prefer C.S. Lewis and The Chronicles of Narnia, or Judy Blume, or even Lemony Snicket, there's no denying that the audience has spoken. Kids love Harry, despite the fuss about the often graphic nature of the storytelling as Rowling grapples with morality and good and evil, betrayal and sacrifice. The story lines prompted some schools in the U.K. and the U.S. to blacklist Harry. Predictably, the furor only served to peak the interest. These modern day McCarthyites who would ban the book should be ashamed of imposing their fears and lack of imagination and loss of wonder on the next generation.

But Rowling is now clearly a target. There's been the requisite accusation of plagiarism from an American Nancy Stouffer, who created a character named Larry Potter. Less troublesome, but also indicative, is that the literati was in a lather when it was learned that Rowling almost nudged Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney out of the top spot for the prestigious Whitbread book prize. When she finished just one vote behind, the Whitbread was accused of dumbing down by its rival, the Booker Prize because they had appointed Jerry Hall (model and Mick Jagger ex-mate) to the panel of judges. Still, the hype is staggering -- there are Potter books, posters, dolls, parties, games. The first three books have passed the 30 million mark in worldwide sales and have been translated into 35 languages for sale in 200 countries.

So if you are still determined to partake, you can have breakfast with Harry on July 8 because Chapters Online and Canada Post have plans to make unprecedented Saturday deliveries of the books ordered online. Otherwise join the line-ups and the parties at bookstores across the country.