

## Books

# Rowling Thunder. Harry Potter's creator rocks the book world, again

By Lev Grossman

LAST WEEK THE NEWS broke that J.K. Rowling had quietly done something that these days most people do as noisily as possible: she published a book. It was a mystery novel called *The Cuckoo's*

*Calling*, which appeared in April under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith. The secret was uncovered by the *Times* of London after one of its writers was tipped off on Twitter from an account that was, mysteriously enough, immediately deleted. Further investigation revealed that Galbraith—whose bio describes him as a former member of the Special Investigative Branch of the Royal Military Police (can fake bios just say anything?)—shared Rowling's agent, and his book had the same editor and publisher as Rowling's novel *The Casual*

*Vacancy*.  
*Times* editor Richard Brooks

then sent *The Cuckoo's Calling* to two experts for computer analysis. They noted similarities to Rowling's other work: apparently writers use short words, like articles and prepositions, in distinctive patterns that amount to a kind of authorial fingerprint. Brooks brought the evidence to Rowling's representatives, and she owned up. "I had hoped to keep this secret a little longer, because being Robert Galbraith has been such a liberating experience," she said in a statement. "It has been wonderful to publish without hype or expectation and pure pleasure to get feedback under a different name."

The response was instantaneous. One editor bravely, red-facedly admitted that, not knowing its real author, she'd turned the book down. Quite a few writers confessed on Twitter and Facebook that they too were secretly J.K. Rowling. Naturally the big winner in all this is Robert Galbraith: *The Cuckoo's Calling* immediately shot to the top of online best-seller lists. Until then the book had sold modestly at best, but going forward it will certainly sell immodestly.

The book's publisher, Mulholland, has announced a new Galbraith novel for next summer.

In retrospect it's impressive that Mulholland—for the sake of Rowling's personal liberation—sat on the secret as long as it did. *L'affaire* Galbraith is, among other things, an object lesson in how brutally unfair the literary world can be. The few reviews of *The Cuckoo's Calling* were good: *Publishers Weekly* called it "stellar"; *Booklist* called it "absorbing"; *Library Journal*

called it "totally engrossing." But through mid-July, according to Nielsen BookScan, it sold only 500 copies in the U.S. If Galbraith were real he would be seriously contemplating a return to police work.

This is by contrast with *The Casual Vacancy*, which was widely reviewed by critics, including this one, drawn by Rowling's name. Most of them rubbished it: the *New York Times*, in an ecstasy of schadenfreude, called it "willfully banal," "depressingly clichéd," "disappointing" and "dull." Nevertheless it sold 1.3 million copies last year. (For the record, *TIME* thought the *The Casual Vacancy* was "brilliant.")

You can't blame readers. Buying a new novel is a risky proposition: they cost more than movies or albums, but it's harder to get a sense of what's inside, and the name on the cover is sometimes the best indicator of a book's contents. And more than any other medium, books demand an active investment from their audience. Reading isn't a passive experience; it's more like a duet between reader and author, and as a result any baggage a reader brings to a book can radically change his or her response to it. In 1979 a would-be writer named Chuck Ross resubmitted Jerzy Kosinski's novel *Steps*, which won the National Book Award in 1969, to 13 literary agents and 14 publishers under the name Erik Demos. Every single one rejected it—even Random House, which had published *Steps* in the first place. What's in a name? Everything, apparently.

But there's a bright side to this story too. For centuries women have been publishing under pseudonyms as an end run around a sexist literary culture. The Brontë sisters did it. So did Louisa May Alcott (she used A.M. Barnard), George Eliot (real name Mary Ann Evans) and Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen). Even J.K. Rowling is a pseudonym: Joanne Rowling, no middle name, became J.K. Rowling at the suggestion of her publisher, who was worried that boys wouldn't read a fantasy novel by a woman. Now, in a twist worthy of Rowling herself, she has adopted a male pseudonym for the express purpose of avoiding attention. She must have known the invisibility cloak would slip eventually. But one hopes she enjoyed the irony while it lasted.

**What's in a name**  
 Rowling's publisher is now printing 300,000 more copies of *The Cuckoo's Calling*

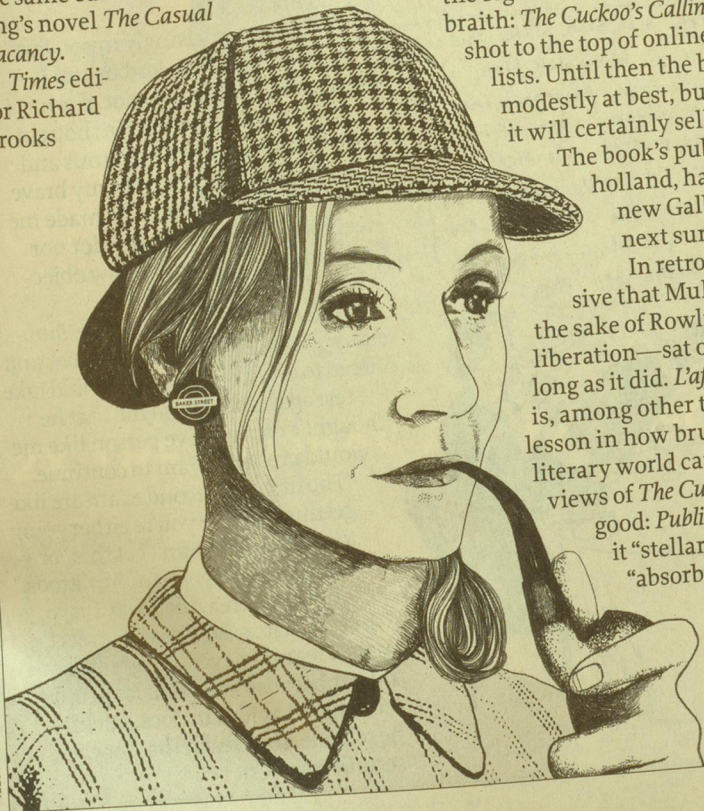


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