

The New York Times

Sunday Book Review

New Faces of Evil

'The Casual Vacancy,' by J. K. Rowling

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Published: October 26, 2012



Illustration by Brian Cronin

From the spring of 1840 through the winter of 1841, Charles Dickens alternately horrified and captivated readers of his weekly magazine with the pitiful tale of Nell Trent in “The Old Curiosity Shop.” A large crowd was waiting at the pier when the ship carrying the final installment reached Lower Manhattan. According to Little Nell lore, as the surging mass heaved forward a voice cried out to the captain, “Does Little Nell die?” The answer “yes” yielded a hushed silence. The only contemporary author whose novels could lay claim to such international devotion and hysteria is J.K. Rowling.

“Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone” (published in the United States as “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone”) started a phenomenon that only grew with the publication of each subsequent volume. Between 1997 and 2007, millions of adults and children were thrilled, transported and entertained by Rowling’s fertile imagination. Although it has become fashionable in some circles to dismiss the Potter books as clumsily written or derivative, the fact is that Rowling invented one of the most popular heroes of the late 20th century and, in the process, single-handedly rescued a generation that was in danger of turning away from literature. Even if she were never to write another word, her place in history and the gratitude owed to her by the publishing industry remain assured.

“The Casual Vacancy,” Rowling’s much-anticipated departure from the genre of children’s fantasy, is a sprawling homage to the Victorian protest novel as typified by Dickens, George

Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Hardy. Like them, Rowling wishes to engage and enrage her readers, inspiring them to take socially conscious action. Rather predictably, the early reviews of the book have been either excessively fawning or unduly harsh. There is no reason Rowling should not try her hand at a state-of-the-nation novel; in fact, she joins a famous roster this year that includes Martin Amis (“Lionel Asbo”), John Lanchester (“Capital”) and Zadie Smith (“NW”). Rowling has clearly thought long and felt deeply about the ills of modern society. Her success has given her a platform, and she intends to use it.

Although all but one of the deaths in “The Casual Vacancy” stem from accident or natural causes rather than design, British readers will recognize in the general arc of the novel echoes of two notorious crimes. The first comes from the 1993 abduction and murder of a toddler by two 10-year-old boys who were known by their courtroom designations as “Child A” and “Child B.” The pair encountered several passers-by as they dragged their sobbing hostage on his final journey, none of whom attempted to rescue the victim. The second crime involved the 2007 torture and murder of a little boy by his mother and her lodgers. Known in the courtroom as “Baby P,” the child died despite receiving over 60 visits from social workers, police officers and health workers, who were evidently either lazy, incompetent or blind to his plight. A recurring motif in both these events was the cry “Who is to blame?” Rowling’s novel is an attempt to answer this question in its larger sense through the forensic dissection of middle-class life in an outwardly idyllic town called Pagford.

The large cast of characters in Pagford would have challenged even the most attentive 19th-century reader. Rowling gives us eight households, whose ties to one another become clearer as the routines and preoccupations of the town’s daily life are revealed. The ostensible premise of the novel is the vicious political battle over plans to redraw the municipal boundaries after the death of a parish councilor opens up the possibility that a nearby housing project could be shunted to a different district, a goal dear to the heart of Pagford’s snobs. However, the real heart of “The Casual Vacancy” lies not with the town’s adults but with its teenagers, whose suffering is measured in large part by how much they deal their pain back to the people around them.

Rowling has always harbored a particular loathing for middle-class smugness and self-congratulation — the kind Dickens so effectively satirized in “Oliver Twist.” In “Harry Potter,” these twin evils are represented in the Muggle world by the Durselys’ obsession with respectability and in wizarding by the popularity of Lord Voldemort’s creed of pure-blood supremacy. In her move to adult fiction, Rowling has not been able to shed certain stylistic features that are acceptable or even expected from children’s authors. Juvenile literature often uses physical metaphors to highlight emotional states because in children the two tend to be so closely allied. “The Casual Vacancy” has various characters feeling guilt “clawing” at their “insides,” a “hollowness in the stomach,” fear “fluttering” inside the “belly,” a “queasy” stomach, a “lowering in the pit” of the stomach, a “knot” in the stomach. In adult fiction, it isn’t necessary to load so many actions — or objects — with adverbs and adjectives. Children thrive on heavily signposted plots, on moral exposition masked as dialogue. Adults don’t need or want such direction.

Yet Rowling’s novel is also crammed with scenes and set pieces that demonstrate her superlative powers of observation: the subtle ways a wife can exact revenge on a husband, the visceral urges that drive adolescent lust. At times, though, it feels as if everything Rowling ever

wanted to say about anything has been thrown together here, without taking care to determine whether all these ideas detract from or complement one another. A firmer control over the material might have prevented Pagford's inhabitants from being turned into a gallery of grotesques, with every character carrying a label: wife beater, drug addict, alcoholic, snob, gossip, fantasist and so on. The unattractive sneer at middlebrow taste could have been toned down too. Few, if any, will share Rowling's notion that a weakness for royal-themed tchotchkes and chenille robes is a sign of moral turpitude.

Editing occasionally involves saving a novelist from him- or herself. Without expert intervention, even the most heartfelt story will be undermined if the grinding of levers becomes too obvious. Readers of Hardy's "Jude the Obscure" or Eliot's "Mill on the Floss" will recognize the "death as a moral message" that concludes "The Casual Vacancy" and feel equally manipulated. Those familiar with Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Match Girl" may also detect a certain sentimental similarity between his description of her death (the child was "far above the earth, where there was neither cold nor hunger nor pain, for they were with God") and that of Rowling's equivalent, who dies "in hope and without regret," having achieved "her only ambition: she had joined her brother where nobody could part them."

A thoughtful edit might have removed many of the stylistic slippages that mar "The Casual Vacancy." Rowling is at the height of her creative powers: there might have been a good, possibly even great, 300-page social novel inside the 500-page tearjerker we have instead. Let's hope it will be different next time.

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