

# The Casual Vacancy

Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Hogwarts anymore.



**JOANNE "JO" ROWLING** (born July 31, 1965), pen name J. K. Rowling, is a British novelist best known as the author of the *Harry Potter* series. The Potter books have gained worldwide attention, won multiple awards, and sold more than 400 million copies.

If J.K. Rowling set out to write a novel that is the complete opposite of *Harry Potter*, then, on the surface, she succeeded with *The Casual Vacancy*. If *Harry Potter* is set in a children's world of magic, *The Casual Vacancy* is very firmly set in an adult's world of the mundane. Specifically, it's set in Pagford, a fictional, idyllic town in England, which Rowling uses as a microcosm for humanity.

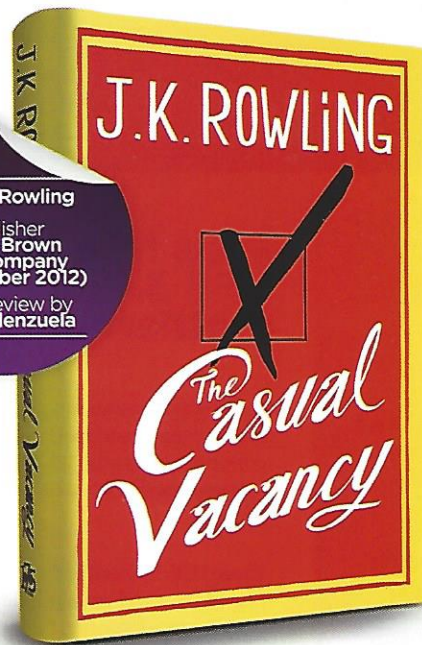
One thing that the two works do have in common, though: They both start out with a death.

Barry Fairbrother, a local parish councilor, is on a wedding anniversary dinner with his wife when he abruptly drops dead with a brain aneurysm in the parking lot. His death unexpectedly sets off a chain of events. Barry, it turns out, was a central figure in the small town's politics and intrigues.

Ostensibly, the book deals with the jockeying for power that happens after Barry's death, which has created a "casual vacancy" in the Pagford Parish Council. Two factions are at war over the future of the town, and it doesn't take you long to realize that their struggle is symbolic of one that is as old as time itself: us versus them, the haves versus the have-nots.

J.K. Rowling's strength remains in creating rich and complex characters. Even though the book is populated with dozens of the town's residents, with the novel's point of view swiftly transitioning back and forth between them, she is still able to make each character distinct and ultimately relatable. While none of them are perfect, none of them are also beyond redemption. You actually get the feeling that these are people you already know in the real world; they're your relatives, next-door neighbors, and classmates in high school.

By J.K. Rowling  
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Book review by  
Aisa Valenzuela



“  
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The novel seems to drag in the beginning as each character is introduced. However, about a third of the way in, Rowling magic starts to happen: You start to care for these characters—even grow to like some of them—and wonder what's going to happen next.

This is not to say this is a book for everyone. *The Casual Vacancy* is a dark

and disturbing novel, definitely one for adults only. Rape, drugs, bullying, scandal, and infidelity all occur within its pages... It will most certainly not be everyone's cup of tea.

With that said, the novel is a very deep one, too. Once you get over the shock of how unlike *Harry Potter* it is, and take the time to peel back the layers of the onion, signature Rowling elements start to emerge. Her values of love, tolerance, and courage—so expertly showcased in the *Harry Potter* series—still form the backbone of this novel.

The small town intrigues and storyline may seem petty and ordinary at first glance, but Rowling weaves this into a larger fable about morality and human relationships. In the end, each character may not get what they want, but they get what they need. There is a beautiful symmetry to the ending; even random plot devices are brought full circle.

*Time* critic Lev Grossman says in his review, "This is a deeply moving book by somebody who understands both human beings and novels very, very deeply."

And that has a magic all its own. 