

The Casual Vacancy *J.K. Rowling*

Fiction

505 Pages; pub 2012

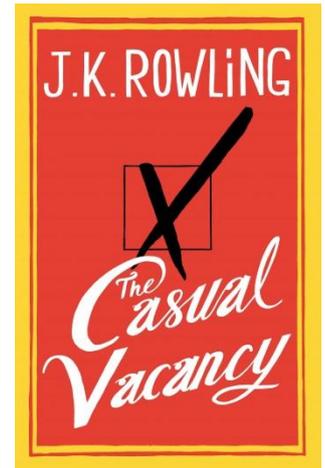
When Barry Fairbrother dies in his early forties, the town of Pagford is left in shock. Pagford is, seemingly, an English idyll, with a cobbled market square and an ancient abbey, but what lies behind the pretty façade is a town at war. Rich at war with poor, teenagers at war with their parents, wives at war with their husbands, teachers at war with their pupils ... Pagford is not what it first seems. And the empty seat left by Barry on the parish council soon becomes the catalyst for the biggest war the town has yet seen. Who will triumph in an election fraught with passion, duplicity and unexpected revelations?

REVIEWS

Publishers Weekly Review:

On the face of it, Rowling's first adult book is very different from the Harry Potter books that made her rich and famous. It's resolutely unmagical: the closest thing to wizardry is the ability to hack into the amateurish Pagford Parish Council Web site. Instead of a battle for worldwide domination, there's a fight over a suddenly empty seat on that Council, the vacancy of the title. Yet despite the lack of invisibility cloaks and pensieves, Pagford isn't so different from Harry's world. There's a massive divide between the haves and the have-nots—the residents of the Fields, the council flats that some want to push off onto a neighbouring county council. When Councilor Barry Fairbrother—born in Fields but now a middle-class Pagford—dies suddenly, the fight gets uglier. In tiny Pagford, and at its school, which caters to rich and poor alike, everyone is connected: obstreperous teenager Krystal Weedon, the sole functioning member of her working-class family, hooks up with the middle-class son of her guidance counselor; the social worker watching over Krystal's drug-addled mother dates the law partner of the son of the dead man's fiercest Council rival; Krystal's great-grandmother's doctor was Fairbrother's closest ally; the daughters of the doctor and the social worker work together, along with the best friend of Krystal's hookup; and so on. Rowling is relentlessly competent: all these people and their hatreds and hopes are established and mixed together. Secrets are revealed, relationships twist and break, and the book rolls toward its awful, logical climax with aplomb. As in the Harry Potter books, children make mistakes and join together with a common cause, accompanied here by adults, some malicious, some trying yet failing. Minus the magic, though, good and evil are depressingly human, and while the characters are all well drawn and believable, they aren't much fun.

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J.K. Rowling



DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. Before reading, did you have certain expectations for this book based on the Harry Potter series? If so, does *The Casual Vacancy* meet these expectations?
2. The book has more than 30 main characters. Did you have trouble keeping them and storylines in order?
3. Do you think the profanity, violence and sex is excessive and sensational? Is Rowling trying to prove that she can write for adults or does it enhance the plot?
4. Which storyline with which characters is your favourite and why? Least favourite?
5. Rowling describes the book as a "comic tragedy". What does that mean? Some have talked about the wit, others described the lack of it. Do you find her wit on display in the book?
6. Many reviewers and readers complain that the plot takes is slow to get off the ground and drags in some parts. What do you think? Is *The Casual Vacancy* too long at 500+ pages?
7. Before the success of Harry Potter, Rowling had experiences with poverty. Does knowing this increase the creditability of the Krystal character?
8. In many interviews, Rowling states that she felt she "had to write" this book and that it's very personal to her. Several characters and experiences can be paralled to her life. For example, Howard Mollinson and Simon Price are her estranged real-life father; Gavin is her first husband; Kay Bawden is a young, single J.K. Do you see any of your own relationships in the book? Does the story cause you to examine any of your relationships?
9. Is the ending satisfying? Does Rowling tie up loose ends or does she leave some things unanswered?

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