



# Potter Has Limited Effect on Reading Habits

By MOTOKO RICH  
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Of all the magical powers wielded by [Harry Potter](#), perhaps none has cast a stronger spell than his supposed ability to transform the reading habits of young people. In what has become near mythology about the wildly popular series by [J. K. Rowling](#), many parents, teachers, librarians and booksellers have credited it with inspiring a generation of kids to read for pleasure in a world dominated by instant messaging and music downloads.

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J. D. Pooley for The New York Times  
Kara Havranek, 13, is not sure if she will read as much post Potter.

And so it has, for many children. But in keeping with the intricately plotted novels themselves, the truth about Harry Potter and reading is not quite so straightforward a success story. Indeed, as the series draws to a much-lamented close, federal statistics show that the percentage of youngsters who read for fun continues to drop significantly as children get older, at almost exactly the same rate as before Harry Potter came along.

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There is no doubt that the books have been a publishing sensation. In the 10 years since the first one, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," was published, the series has sold 325 million copies worldwide, with 121.5 million in print in the United States alone. Before Harry Potter, it was virtually unheard of for kids to queue up for a mere book. Children who had previously read short chapter books were suddenly plowing through more than 700 pages in a matter of days. Scholastic, the series's United States publisher, plans a record-setting print run of 12 million copies for "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," the eagerly awaited seventh and final installment due out at 12:01 a.m. on July 21.

But some researchers and educators say that the series, in the end, has not permanently tempted children to put down their Game Boys and curl up with a book instead. Some kids have found themselves daunted by the growing size of the books ("Sorcerer's Stone" was 309 pages; "Deathly Hallows," will be 784). Others say that Harry Potter does not have as much resonance as titles that more realistically reflect their daily lives. "The Harry Potter craze was a very positive thing for kids," said Dana Gioia, chairman of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), who has reviewed statistics from federal and private sources that consistently show that children read less as they age. "It got millions of kids to read a long and reasonably complex series of books. The trouble is that one Harry Potter novel every few years is not enough to reverse the decline in reading."

Educators agree that the series can't get the job done alone.

"Unless there are scaffolds in place for kids — an enthusiastic adult saying, 'Here's the next one' — it's not going to happen," said Nancie Atwell, the author of "The Reading Zone: How to Help Kids Become Skilled, Passionate, Habitual, Critical Readers" and a teacher in

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Edgecomb, Me. "And in way too many American classrooms it's not happening."

Young people are less inclined to read for pleasure as they move into their teenage years for a variety of reasons, educators say. Some of these are trends of long standing (older children inevitably become more socially active, spend more time on reading-for-school or simply find other sources of entertainment other than books), and some are of more recent vintage (the multiplying menagerie of high-tech gizmos that compete for their attention, from iPods to Wii consoles). What parents and others hoped was that the phenomenal success of the Potter books would blunt these trends, perhaps even creating a generation of lifelong readers in their wake.

"Anyone who has children or grandchildren sees the competition for children's time increasing as they enter adolescence, and the difficulty that reading seems to have to compete effectively," Mr. Gioia said.

Many thousands of children have, indeed, gone from the Potter books to other pleasure reading. But others have dropped away.

Starting when Avram Leierwood was 7, he would read the books aloud with his mother, Mina. "We'd sit in the treehouse in our backyard and take turns," recalled Ms. Leierwood, of South Minneapolis.

But while Ms. Leierwood has remained an avid fan, Avram, now 15, is indifferent. When "Deathly Hallows" comes out, he will be on a canoe trip. As for reading, he said: "I don't really have much time anymore. I like to hang out with my friends, talk, go watch movies and stuff, go to the park and play ultimate Frisbee."

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a series of federal tests administered every few years to a sample of students in grades 4, 8 and 12, the percentage of kids who said they read for fun almost every day dropped from 43 percent in fourth grade to 19 percent in eighth grade in 1998, the year "Sorcerer's Stone" was published in the United States. In 2005, when "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince," the sixth book, was published, the results were identical.

Many parents, educators and librarians say that despite such statistics, they have seen enough evidence to convince them that Harry Potter is a bona fide hero.

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