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J.K. Rowling to revisit Harry Potter's world in new film series



Author J.K. Rowling attends the world premiere of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows -- Part 2" in London in 2011. (Carl Cour / AFP/Getty Images)

By Daniel Miller and Amy Kaufman
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Warner Bros. is hoping "Harry Potter" author J.K. Rowling has another magic trick up her sleeve.

More than two years after the last film in the eight-picture franchise about the boy wizard hit theaters, the studio announced it would release a series of films inspired by "Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them," a 42-page fictional Hogwarts textbook that Rowling wrote in 2001 to accompany her "Potter" novels.

The deal is a major coup for Warner Bros. and its new chief executive, Kevin Tsujihara, who studio insiders said spent several months negotiating the arrangement with Rowling.

It could mean years of new life for the "Potter" franchise, which sold more than \$7.7 billion in movie tickets worldwide — and became a popular theme park attraction — before coming to an end in 2011 with "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows — Part 2."

The pact could supply the Burbank film studio with a new franchise, introducing "Fantastic Beasts" to audiences who were too young for the original "Potter" series.

"Harry Potter has been a sensational project for the studio," said Dan Fellman, president of domestic distribution for Warner Bros. "I can't imagine why we won't continue to have the fan base of the 'Potter' series come out. We can even go much younger and connect with a whole new generation."

The deal couldn't come at a better time for the Burbank studio, which has had a tumultuous year filled with the departures of key executives and an important creative partner.

In June, roughly three months after Tsujihara became CEO, Jeff Robinov, head of Warner Bros.' movie unit, departed in the aftermath of a grueling, two-year-plus fight to replace Barry Meyer as chairman and chief executive. Warner Bros. Television Group chief Bruce Rosenblum also left the company, Hollywood's largest film and television studio and a unit of Time Warner Inc.

About a month after Robinov left, film production powerhouse Legendary Entertainment, long a key supplier of action and fantasy films to the studio, struck a production, co-financing and distribution deal with rival Universal Pictures.

"It's significant in the career of Tsujihara, because obviously he has been under pressure to do something to get this company's entertainment activities moving in the right direction again," said Hal Vogel, an entertainment industry analyst who has long followed Time Warner. "They had such a long positive history, but turmoil over the last year has been enormous. If I were in his position this kind of deal would have been a priority to complete."

The Rowling deal doesn't exactly offer a replacement for Legendary, but it would appear to give Warner Bros. a steady stream of pictures with youth appeal, which is increasingly key to a franchise's success.

Warner Bros. also will serve as the distributor of a planned [BBC](#) television adaptation of Rowling's bestselling 2012 non-Potter novel "The Casual Vacancy." The miniseries is expected to begin production next year.

The deal does not include any planned film or television production based on "The Cuckoo's Calling," a bestselling crime novel Rowling released under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith earlier this year.

Rowling, 48, will write the "Beasts" screenplay — a first for the British author. When Warner Bros. proposed turning the book into a film, the author said she felt uncomfortable with the idea of another screenwriter taking on her "fictional universe."

Warner Bros. has not said when production would begin, or announced a release date.

Gerry Philpott, chief executive of market research firm E-Poll, said that among the entertainment industry figures his company tracks, Rowling has one of the highest ratings from consumers in terms of their interest in her work. He said that would help Warner Bros. sell a film series from the "Harry Potter" author — even if the bespectacled wizard doesn't make an appearance.

"While this isn't exactly 'Harry Potter,' she brings so much goodwill to the franchise," Philpott said. "It was a no-brainer for Warner Bros. and her to do this. You've got one of the biggest booksellers ever and tremendous feeling about her storytelling ability."

The "Potter" books have sold more than 450 million copies worldwide. And though both "The Dark Knight" and "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey" each grossed more than \$1 billion worldwide in recent years, no Warner Bros. film has ever been able to top "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2" at the box office.

The movie franchise proved so popular that it spawned a Universal Studios theme park attraction in Orlando, Fla., and two similar developments that are currently under construction. Universal Studios Japan's Wizarding World of Harry Potter is slated to open in late 2014, and a similar project at Universal Studios Hollywood would open in 2016 at the earliest.

After Universal's sister park in Orlando opened the Wizarding World of Harry Potter in June 2010, attendance jumped to 7.7 million in 2011, a 29% increase compared with the previous year, according to industry studies. The park also enjoyed a surge in sales of wands, butter beer, T-shirts and other souvenirs.

The "Fantastic Beasts" brand could extend to a theme park attraction. That would also be a boon for Universal, which licenses the "Harry Potter" intellectual property from Warner Bros. for use in the attractions.

Warner Bros. said that "Beasts" would be exploited across multiple mediums — including video games, consumer products and digital spaces. The "Potter" franchise has already generated more than \$7 billion in retail sales.

The new movie project traces its roots to the first "Harry Potter" book, which was released in 1997.

In the first "Harry Potter" novel, the protagonist studied a textbook called "Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them" while at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Rowling's new film will center on Newt Scamander, who wrote that schoolbook, and will be set in New York 70 years pre-Potter.

Scamander, born in 1897, makes his living studying dozens of magical species as a "magizoologist." His book describes some classic mythological beings such as centaurs, fairies and gnomes, but there are more unusual species too, such as a talking eight-eyed spider called an acromantula and a bird called a jobberknoll that makes no sound until its death.

Speaking at the Bank of America Merrill Lynch 2013 Media, Communications & Entertainment Conference on Thursday afternoon, Tsujihara said that the movie would be made in the "Potter" style.

"The look and feel of the movie is going to be very similar because you want to stay in that world," he said.

Until now, Rowling has been cagey about whether she would return to the world of Potter. In 2010, she told Oprah Winfrey that she "could definitely" write an eighth or ninth book, saying, "I think I am done, but you never know."

Now, devoted fans have their answer. As news of Rowling's impending screenplay ricocheted around the Internet Thursday, the general sentiment among Muggles was enthusiasm.

"I think it will be as good as the Harry Potter franchise — maybe even better, because the Harry Potter world is Rowling's world, and she'll be the one taking us back to it," said Lindsay Orr, a 23-year-old downtown L.A. resident who began reading the Potter books in the fourth grade. "Is it a desperate ploy to get Harry Potter fans back in theaters? I personally don't care — the idea seems great and I'm excited for it."