

HARRY POTTER

R.I.P.?



WAS SHE HINTING OR JUST TEASING?

"I can completely understand the mentality of an author who thinks, 'Well, I'm going to kill them off,'" Rowling said last year. "Because that means there can be no non-author-written sequels."

Perish the thought! But with the final chapter of J.K. ROWLING's hit series due in stores in July, buzz is building that her boy wizard gets the ax

First Tony Soprano, now Harry Potter. It's hard enough to bid farewell to a beloved series, but what happens if the main character gets killed off? That's the question on everyone's mind, from the bookworm down the block to bookies across the pond—at least one of whom is no longer accepting bets on the young wizard's fate in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, out July 21. "Over 90 percent of the bets coming in were for Harry dying," says Rupert Adams of the London bookmaker William Hill. "It got to the stage where we'd be giving out money for free." Just 30 percent of readers polled by the-leaky-cauldron.org, a Potter fan site, think Rowling's hero's a goner, but, says the site's webmaster Melissa Anelli, "The level of speculation is the highest it's ever been."

The doomsaying started in '03, when

Rowling, asked what Harry would be like as a man, replied, "How do you know he'll still be alive?" Stoking the fears: her disclosure that two major characters will die in *Hallows*, the last book in the best-selling children's series. And when the book's coeditor Arthur Levine said on the *Today* show in March that he was "sobbing at points" while reading it, curtains for Harry seemed likelier than ever. (Note to tea-leaf readers: Levine now says he won't tell "exactly what made me cry, but you'd be surprised." Which could mean . . . who knows?)

One thing's certain: No more Harry Potter books means sadness for longtime fans. Beyond that? "I trust J.K. Rowling," says Emerson Spartz, 20, who has run the mugglenet.com site since he was 12. "That's the bottom line."

If He Dies . . . A Guide for Parents

If Harry *does* meet up with that great wizard in the sky, how can parents help their kids cope? Child psychiatrist Dr. Michael Brody offers some pointers:

1) Don't worry they'll be scarred for life. There's a thing with parents today—our kids cannot experience any anxiety without us rushing in, so they don't get any practice dealing with it. Reading a book where there's conflict and terror isn't the worst thing in the world. And the thing about reading as opposed to visual images on TV is that it gives the kids time to process it.

2) Use the experience as a teaching moment.

For younger children, there are two big mysteries: Where do babies come from, and what happens when people die? If something like this does happen at the end of the book, it's up to the parents to have a discussion. That said, the book may not be appropriate for very young children.

3) Don't say, "It's just a book!" You do have to make it clear that this is a fictional character, but to a kid, Harry Potter is very real, so the kid's feelings are going to be very real. In some ways parents are going to have to deal with this in the same way they would with the death of a family member or pet.