

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them Short Guide

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by J. K. Rowling

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Overview

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them is a spin-off from the books in Rowling's Harry Potter series and is intended to be one of the books Harry and his friends use themselves.

This book is among Harry Potter's own schoolbooks, with Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them purportedly written by Newt Scamander, an expert in "magizoology."

This book is a bestiary, hailed as the most complete listing of imaginary creatures available and containing both familiar beasts, such as unicorns and dragons, and unfamiliar ones, such as Flobberworms and Mackled Malaclaws. Rowling lists these beasts in alphabetical order and provides detailed information about each one, as well as including a rating indicating how dangerous each of these beasts is to non-magic folks, or Muggles. Rowling intended for these books to seem like real textbooks, textbooks that readers of the "Harry Potter" books may already find familiar. Fantastic Beasts was mentioned in Rowling's first book, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, where it was required reading for first-year students in the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

About the Author

J. K. (Joanne Kathleen) Rowling was born in Gloucestershire, England on July 31, 1966. She attended Exeter University and worked as a teacher in Edinburgh, Scotland and in Portugal before publishing her first Harry Potter book in 1997. She wrote this book while she was a single mother supported by public assistance, unable to work and pay for child care at the same time.

After the publication of this first book, entitled Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Rowling's situation changed from rags to riches. The first three books in her seven book series sold over 30 million copies, they were printed in 35 languages, and Rowling earned over \$400 million.

Rowling has received numerous awards for her Harry Potter books, and because of her tremendous success stimulating children to read, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from St. Andrews, Scotland in 2000. Because Rowling's Harry Potter books dominated the top slots on the New York Times Best Seller list, the decision was made to create a separate best seller's list for children's books. This of course, was an honor to Rowling as well as a boon for children's authors. Rowling is an inspiration for children's authors. She achieved stardom with her first published book, she sold Warner Bros, the film rights to her first two books, and she sold all seven volumes of Harry Potter's adventures as a series, each volume focusing on one year of Harry's training at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The publication of Quidditch Through the Ages and Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them came about after the British charity Comic Relief, dedicated to helping poor children all over the world, asked Rowling to write something for them. They suggested a short story at first, but Rowling instead suggested the idea of producing two of Harry's textbooks from the Hogwarts School. Not surprisingly, these two "textbooks" achieved remarkable success. They are distributed all over the world, and most of the money from these titles goes to charity.

Setting

The setting of the book is truly within the fantasy world Rowling created for Harry Potter and his friends; a place where witches and wizards and magical beings of all sorts exist side by side with ordinary beings.

When Rowling brought Harry Potter and his friends to life, she created a world in which children of all ages found themselves immersed, and where they could hold on to their childhood belief in magic. It is in this world where Rowling's fantastic beasts live, seventy-five species in all, in addition to ten separate species of dragon.

Rowling is adept at sustaining her fantasy.

She describes the habitat of these creatures as if they existed in the real world, informing readers that the Leprechaun lives only in Ireland, for instance, and that the Tebo lives in the Congo and Zaire. All of these creatures can materialize in Harry Potter's world, however, though often times only the wizards can see them. Newt Scamander, in his introduction, explains one reason why Muggles, or ordinary folks, rarely see them. Muggles fear magic, he explains, so they are under the illusion that these creatures exist only in the imagination. The setting of the book, therefore, is the imagination, and any reader who finds himself captivated with Rowling's books lives in the imagination as well.

Social Sensitivity

The wide appeal of Rowling's books and the success she has had in creating a world of magic influenced this author to create this "textbook" and its companion book, *Quidditch Through the Ages*. *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* is geared to people of all ages, and to Harry Potter fans specifically, but also to anyone who peruses any kind of bestiary or mythological reference book and to anyone who finds themselves captivated by the idea that a world may exist that is not readily recognizable to humans. *Fantastic Beasts* serves as an actual bestiary, providing information about unicorns and kelpies and many other creatures that appear in myths and legends around the world: Even people who have never read a "Harry Potter" book will find many of these beasts familiar.

On first inspection, it appears that *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, as well as *Quidditch Through the Ages*, is an effort on Rowling's part to cash in on her fame. Due to the popularity of her "Harry Potter" books, Rowling probably knew that people would read anything connected to Harry Potter. Furthermore, the timing of these two textbooks was perfect: they were published in 2000 when no other Harry Potter books could be seen on the horizon. Though these two books certainly boosted Rowling's popularity, she wrote them for charity and not for profit. Proceeds from both *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and *Quidditch Through the Ages* support Comic Relief, a British charity founded by a group of comedians to help needy children around the world.

Literary Qualities

Newt Scamander (a.k.a. J. K. Rowling) wrote *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* in encyclopedia format, thus giving it a stamp of reality. Rowling uses numerous devices to make her book a credible representation of Harry Potter's actual schoolbook.

First and foremost, Rowling does not identify herself as the author, but rather she identifies one of the characters from her fictional world as the author. She also includes graffiti, scribbled in the book's margins by Harry and Ron, to give substance to her characters and to maintain the suspension of disbelief.

Themes and Characters

This book is unconventional in that it is not intended as a listing of mythological creatures as such, but it is intended as a listing of creatures presumed by those engrossed in Harry Potter's magic world to actually exist. If there were a theme to be identified in the book it would have to be simply the validation that magic exists, and the underlying belief that wizards can encounter any of the creatures that grace these pages at any time.

In addition to the beasts themselves, the characters in the book are the Harry Potter characters who give these beasts reality. Included are Harry Potter, his friend Ron Weasley, Newt Scamander, Professor Dumbledore (who wrote the Foreword), and all of the peripheral characters who add validity to Rowling's world. Harry's friend Hagrid, for instance, also appears, as do Dumbledore's wife, Porpentina, and their pet Kneazles: Hoppy, Milly and Mauler.

Kneazles are just one of the seventy-five types of creatures listed in the bestiary. The entry for each type of creature attempts to validate the creature's existence by including a description of its characteristics and habitat and an explanation of its relationship with wizards. Each entry also includes a Ministry of Magic (M.O.M.) classification rating how dangerous the creature is, whether it is essentially harmless, or whether it is a "known wizard killer" and "impossible to tame or domesticate." The horrendous Nandu who Harry and Ron encounter in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, the Knarl who Muggles often mistake for a hedgehog, and the demonic Nogtail who resembles a stunted piglet are just a few of the fantastic creatures listed in the bestiary. The footnotes provide additional information and refer the reader to other fictional books, written by other fictional authors, which add to the scholarly tone of the book.

Fantastic Beasts and How to Find Them is written for Muggles, non-magical people who share the world with wizards but who have no power and therefore no knowledge of how to interact with powerful creatures.

Dumbledore, in the Foreword, explains why this book is now offered to Muggles for the first time. In Harry Potter's world, the book can be found in the households of nearly every family that practices wizardry, Dumbledore tells readers. He says that the book is in its fifty-second edition, attesting to its usefulness and importance as a scholarly textbook.

Newt Scamander, the fictional author of this book, can perhaps be considered the book's primary "character" because it is his knowledge of "magizology" that qualified him to write the bestiary and it is Rowling's knowledge of him that allows him to do it. Scamander, of course, is simply a pen name for J. K. Rowling, but his character existed in her mind and in her other books long before this book was published. Rowling provides information about Scamander's life and work on a page entitled "About the Author." This "author" purportedly collected the information for the book while traveling abroad during research trips for the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau.



Scamander appears in the book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* as a known expert in "magizoology," which is defined as "the study of magical beasts."

He worked for the Beast Division of the Ministry of Magic in the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures for many years, but is now retired and living in Dorset.

Just as Rowling uses the character of Scamander to write the book, she uses the character of Albus Dumbledore to relate the book's purpose. Both of these characters are familiar to Harry Potter fans.

Dumbledore is the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and Scamander chose him to write the Foreword. In this section Dumbledore informs readers that the book supports Comic Relief, that this is a facsimile of Harry's personal copy, and that this book is now being offered to Muggles for the first time.

Rowling fills Dumbledore's Foreword with facts that sustain the fantasy and keep readers captivated by her magical world. It says, "Wizards wishing to make additional donations [to Comic Relief] should do so through Gringotts Wizarding Bank (ask for Griphook)". It also says that the book carries a "Thief's Curse," and that Muggles should be assured that "the amusing creatures described hereafter are fictional and cannot hurt you."

Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think that J. K. Rowling wrote this book and its companion book primarily to increase her stardom or primarily to help the British charity Comic Relief? Explain.
2. Who would you identify as the primary characters in this book, the mythological beasts or Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Professor Dumbledore, and Newt Scamander?
3. Why do you suppose Dumbledore says in the foreword that the creatures in the book are imaginary and can not hurt you?
4. Do you think the A-Z format of the book hinders Rowlings' ability to be creative? Why or why not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Explain the devices Rowling uses to make this bestiary appear to be real.
2. J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" books have been so successful that readers in the United States often purchase copies of the British editions over the Internet rather than wait for the American editions to be published. This has caused much controversy, however. Research the issue of "marketing territory infringement" and voice your opinion on it the issue as it relates to Rowling's books.
3. Discuss the ways in which Rowling develops the character of Newt Scamander.
4. Rowling's books have received criticism from some Christian fundamentalists who believe that the Harry Potter books promote Satanism. Research this issue and describe the reasoning behind this claim.
5. Explain the term "suspension of disbelief" and relate it to Rowling's writing.

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Related Titles

Quidditch Through the Ages, the companion book to *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, is another of Harry Potter's schoolbooks. This one not Harry's own copy, but purportedly borrowed from the library of Harry's school, the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Quidditch is a game of wizards and witches, something like soccer but played in the air on broomsticks, and this book provides a history of the sport and details accounts of past matches.

In addition to *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, numerous other bestiaries have been published over the years, though most of them serve as general listings of creatures in myths and legends throughout the ages. Books such as *The Book of Beasts* by T. H. White, *Treasury of Fantastic and Mythological Creatures: 1087 Renderings from Historic Sources* by Richard Huber, and *Gurps Bestiary* by Steffan O'Sullivan, et al., all serve the purpose of identifying imaginary creatures people might encounter as they read myths and legends from different parts of the world.

Many of the beasts in Rowling's book appear in these other bestiaries as well, though many of them are unique to her own books and the magic world she creates for Harry Potter and his friends. David Day attempted to do something of this same thing with his *Tolkein Bestiary*, published in 1984. This book lists imaginary beasts that appear in J. R. R. Tolkein's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. In addition to imaginary beasts, Day's book includes races, nations, deities, fauna, and flora unique to the Middle Earth and the Undying Land, the mythical worlds Tolkein created in his works.

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