

Harry Potter e-books plan worries bookstore owners

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British author J.K. Rowling poses for photographers as she announces her new website project Pottermore at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Thursday, June 23, 2011. For the Pottermore project Rowling has written new material about the characters, places and objects in the Harry Potter stories. (AP Photo/Akira Suemori)

(AP) -- Author J.K. Rowling has joined the 21st century on her own special terms.

One of the world's most famous digital holdouts, Rowling [announced Thursday](#) that a new interactive website, <http://www.pottermore.com> , will be the exclusive seller of the e-book editions of her iconic "Harry Potter" series. The news is a landmark for the growing electronic market, especially for the relatively small number of young adult e-book fans, and an unwelcome surprise for the traditional stores which helped sell hundreds of millions of Potter novels.

"Bricks and mortar stores are taking a lot of bullets and there's a limit to how many bullets we can take," says Roxanne Coady, owner of R.J. Julia Booksellers in Madison, Conn, one of more than 200 independent sellers of e-books through [Google](#). "If the sellers of the Rowling e-books are saying they don't need bricks and mortar stores, then that's the result you'll get."

Jon Howells, spokesman for Britain's Waterstone's chain, said the Harry Potter book launches, which for years drew thousands of fans in wizard garb to midnight store openings, "have become the stuff of legend at Waterstone's and other booksellers."

"We're therefore disappointed that, having been a key factor in the growth of the Harry Potter phenomenon since the first book was published, the book trade is effectively banned from selling the long-awaited e-book editions," he said.

Tom Turcan, chief operating officer of Pottermore, said Rowling wanted "to make the books available to everybody, not to make them available only to people who own a particular set of devices, or tethered to a particular set of platforms."

During a press conference in London on Thursday, Rowling cited the special bond she has had with fans online and said she was "phenomenally lucky in that I have the resources to do it myself and therefore I got to do it, I think, right."

"I think this is a fantastic and unique experience that I can afford in every sense," she said.

E-books have jumped from less than 1 percent of total sales four years ago to more than 20 percent. Children's books are catching up as the Kindle, Nook and other devices become cheaper and touchscreen

readers such as the Nook and the iPad enable illustrated stories to be available in digital form. Potter books remain steady sellers four years after the series ended, especially as the final movie approaches, and publishers believe the e-books will be as revolutionary for the digital market as the paper ones were for the traditional market.

"The Potter books took children's books in general to another level and we've never gone back," said Susan Katz, president and publisher of HarperCollins Children's Books. "And I think the news today could be the tipping point for 8-to-12-year-old market."

Pottermore is far more than a retail outlet. The site lets fans delve into Harry Potter's beloved Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They can shop for wands in Diagon Alley, travel to Hogwarts from the imaginary Platform 9 3/4 at London's King's Cross train station and be sorted into Hogwarts school houses by the perceptive Sorting Hat.

Along the way are wand fights, games and new information about characters beloved around the world, including Harry's boorish relatives, the Dursleys. The website also features 18,000 words of new Potter material from Rowling, who said it will have "information I have been hoarding for years" about the books' characters and settings. The level of detail gives Potter fans new reasons to obsess over the wizard and his friends. The final Potter movie, "[Harry Potter](#) and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2," opens in July.

"I go into ridiculous detail about wand woods," Rowling said.

A beta version of the site launches July 31, Harry Potter's birthday, and the e-books become available in October under an unusual arrangement. They will be sold directly from Pottermore, with Rowling's longtime publishers, Bloomsbury Publishing in the United Kingdom and Scholastic Inc. in the United States, sharing revenues. Scholastic and

other publishers have long sold books directly to customers, but through their own websites. And they traditionally have made those releases available to retailers, too.

Children's booksellers have extra reasons to worry. Potter books remain a rite of passage among young readers, one that often includes a visit to the local store. That initiation may now happen online.

"It's one thing if an individual sells book on her own, I can understand that," says Ann Seaton, manager of Hicklebee's Children's Book Store in San Jose, Calif. "But it did sort of surprise me that the publisher would cut us out of the loop. That makes it hard for us.

"We have sold a huge amount of Potter books," she said. "And we were one of those stores that had the midnight parties when a new Potter book came out. I don't think we'll be having a party for the [e-books](#)."

More information: Online: <http://www.pottermore.com>

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