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Harry Potter and the man who conjured up Rowling's millions

As the last Hogwarts book appears, the author's multi-millionaire agent will stay in the shadows

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When midnight strikes on Saturday, there will be no missing the star of the show. JK Rowling, the world's most successful author, will be the centre of attention for 1,700 children at London's Natural History Museum as she signs copies of the seventh and final [Harry Potter](#) adventure.

Throughout the canny construction of 'Brand Potter' - books, films, video games, and now even stamps - one figure has been ever present, like a shadow glimpsed in the cloisters of Hogwarts school.

This enigmatic but utterly crucial influence is Christopher Little, literary agent, fierce protector of Rowling and, thanks to the boy wizard, now a millionaire many times over.

Little has masterminded Rowling's career, from the moment he spotted the potential of her first manuscript to this week's publication of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, which guarantees him yet another jackpot. Amazon, the online retailer, has already sold a record 1.8 million advance copies.

Rowling's publisher, Bloomsbury, held a ballot for the launch at the Natural History Museum, which drew applications from 90,000 children. The first 500 names out of the hat will hear Rowling read from the new book at midnight - webcast live around the world - while a further 1,200 will receive

signed copies. Simultaneously, 279 branches of Waterstone's will open their doors, and there will be numerous other launch parties at independent bookshops up and down the country. This week the Royal Mail is issuing a commemorative set of Harry Potter stamps.

Little, a 65-year-old grandfather, has been content to remain behind the scenes, rarely speaking in public and seldom photographed. But when he first signed up Rowling, he reportedly struck a deal under his usual terms: 15 per cent of gross earnings for the UK market and 20 per cent for merchandising rights, for film, for the US market and for translation deals. With the author's fortune now standing at more than £540m, Little's return has to be estimated as at least £50m.

'He was the luckiest agent ever - when something like that falls in your lap it is luck, but he made the most of it,' said Ed Victor, a leading literary agent. 'He has run the brand admirably. He had to build up an organisation to defend and promote and advance his author's rights and it's all been done very tastefully. He's a charming and affable fellow, but made of steel underneath.'

The son of a coroner who served as a First World War fighter pilot, Little grew up in Liversedge, West Yorkshire, and gained five O-levels at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Wakefield, only to leave during the sixth form to join his uncle's textile business in 1958. The fledgling entrepreneur had impressed his headteacher, EJ Baggaley, who wrote: 'My impression is that he is well suited for a business career - sales management, for instance.'

He spent most of the Sixties and Seventies in the shipping industry in Hong Kong before returning to London to set up a recruitment consultancy called City Boys. His switch to the literary world happened by accident in 1979. A schoolfriend and fellow Hong Kong trader, Philip Nicholson, had written a thriller and was seeking representation. Little agreed to take him on and the book, *Man on Fire*, was published under the pseudonym AJ Quinnell. It went on to sell 7.5 million copies worldwide and become a Hollywood film.

In his only press interview, in 2003, Little recalled: 'The literary agency was really a hobby which started through an accident. I was helping an old friend in his writing career. I had been running as a full-time business for about six years when Harry Potter arrived.'

The agency, run in 'cramped' and 'near-Dickensian' offices in Fulham, south-west London, was cash-strapped until touched by Potter's magic wand. Literary folklore has it that Rowling, then a penniless 29-year-old single

mother, walked into a public library in Edinburgh, looked up a list of literary agents and settled on the name Christopher Little because it sounded like a character from a children's book.

Bryony Evens, his office manager at the time, has said that it went straight into the reject basket because 'Christopher felt that children's books did not make money'. But its unusual black binding caught her eye, prompting her to read the synopsis and show it to Little. He recalled: 'I wrote back to **JK Rowling** within four days of receiving the manuscript. I thought there was something really special there, although we could never have guessed what would happen to it.' He managed to sell it to Bloomsbury for £2,500, but later reaped huge rewards from international rights and has won a reputation as a brilliant deal-maker who puts Rowling first.

According to those who know him, the 6ft 3in Little, divorced with two sons, is unchanged by his wealth and a breed apart from the flamboyant agents and literati who frequent West End restaurants. But he reportedly spent £250,000 on his 60th birthday party at the Chelsea Physic Garden and has admitted: 'I do love sailing, but I rent the boats when I want them - it does save a lot of hassle.'

Ian Chapman, chief executive of Simon & Schuster and a friend of Little for 20 years, said: 'He's very Yorkshire, very northern, very honest and ... still the same simple fellow he's always been.'

Harry in numbers

5 seconds between each pre-order on Amazon website - 1.8 million in total.

279 branches of the book chain Waterstone's holding launch parties at the stroke of midnight on Saturday.

2,000 people expected in the queue at Waterstone's on Piccadilly, London.

24 hours and 1 minute: running time for the audio edition.

90 countries in which the book is being published.

7/4 odds from Ladbrokes on Harry Potter committing suicide at the end of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

- This article was amended on Tuesday July 17 2007 for legal reasons.