

An English Teacher in Porto: In Search of Joanne Rowling

by Christopher Rollason, Ph.D. - rollason54@gmail.com

This article was originally posted on 27 November 2001 on the Usenet newsgroups: alt.fan.harry-potter, rec.arts.books, soc.culture.portuguese. It was last revised on 17 October 2002. It was republished in Lingua Franca (Brussels) Vol. 6, No. 1, January 2003 - <http://www.europarl.eu.int/interp/online/LF99_one/v06_no1/page2.html>, and again, in 2003, at: <http://www.sekilos.com.ar/Rowling_en.html>.



**

At eleven on a chilly October morning in Porto, Portugal's second city, I crossed the threshold of the Café Majestic. The gilt lettering on the Art Déco façade and the profusion of bright lights inside invite the passer-by on Rua de Santa Catarina to walk in and defy the elements with a warm, milky glass of *galão* coffee. The café is just a stone's throw from the Grande Hotel do Porto where I was staying on the same street, a still-palatial mid-nineteenth-century edifice where Teresa Cristina, the last empress of Brazil, breathed her last in 1889. A plaque outside the hotel commemorates this event, but outside the Majestic there is no plaque to tell the world that, just over a century later, this very street also had an honoured part to play in the genesis of no less a figure than Harry Potter.



At the Fnac, the French-owned bookshop-cum-megastore further down the street, the adventures of the planet's most famous fictional wizard are well in evidence, in Portuguese and English, but the children's section boasts no promotional material that might remind the young readers of Porto that Harry's creator, Joanne Rowling, actually lived in their city, from 1990 to 1993. Indeed, the taxi-driver who had brought me the evening before from the airport

to the hotel had never heard of her (*'Eu leio pouco'* - 'I don't read much'). Nor, as I discovered when I sat down, had any of the waiters in the Majestic but one, and he, while he had heard of the books, had no idea that their author was a onetime client. However, fortified with what I had recently read in Sean Smith's recent biography, I knew that Joanne Rowling, in those far-distant days when she was an unknown, twenty-something English teacher eking out a living here in the city of port wine, had indeed frequented the Majestic and had drafted notes for Harry while seated at one of the marble-topped tables.

The Majestic is one of Porto's most popular meeting-places, and almost every table was crowded. Strains of Chopin rose from the house piano as I gazed at the slightly faded gilt mirrors that line both walls, reflecting the hanging lamps, the marble pillars with their gilded Corinthian capitals, and the delicate cream-and-pink tints of the ceiling. The café, a listed building, dates from 1921 and has traditionally hosted the soirées of Porto's literary and philosophical intelligentsia. The atmosphere is relaxed and unhurried, and few better settings could be imagined for the slow uncoiling of a writer's new-hatched imagination. The long lines of burning reflections on both sides give the Majestic its striking appearance from the street, and create a marginally unreal ambiance of warmth and abundance that would not be out of place in the Great Hall at Hogwarts: indeed one could imagine Fawkes, Albus Dumbledore's glorious pet phoenix, basking in his element of fire, right here in this world of light. I stayed at the table a good hour, drinking my way through two suitably hot *galões*, scribbling impressions in my notebook and - with the head waiter's kind permission - photographing the unforgettable interior, with its now-indelible associations of a creative personality who at the time had been, apparently, just another foreign client.

I left the Majestic and Rua de Santa Catarina, and cut across Rua Formosa to the left, in search of Avenida de Fernão de Magalhães - the street where, again thanks to Sean Smith, I knew Joanne had worked at the Encounter English school. I lunched on the way; the route



took me through a series of rather workaday streets, nonetheless enlivened by the welcome Portuguese touches of mosaic pavements, blue-tiled housefronts and ever-present cafés and bars. Avenida Magalhães itself, named after the explorer known in English as Ferdinand Magellan, conjured up no images of exotic discovery: it proved to be a long, drab, featureless thoroughfare stretching out into the suburbs. I located

Encounter English at No 604: the school occupies the top two floors of a three-storey building above a grocer's. The walls are painted buff; to the left are two pillar-boxes - one blue, the other red and British-looking, and thinly cylindrical enough to have reminded Joanne of home; to the right is a clothes shop. As befitted a Saturday afternoon, the blinds were down, but activity was recalled by the signs: *'Inscrições Abertas'* ('Open for registration') and *'Inglês, Francês, Alemão, Italiano'* ('English, French, German, Italian'). Private language schools are often hole-in-corner affairs, and this one looked cramped and undistinguished. However, we know that here on the school's sole computer an obscure teacher typed out drafts that later went into 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone': this unprepossessing avenue holds its magic secrets.



I continued my journey, returning down Avenida Magalhães and crossing a square to the corner of Rua do Duque de Saldanha. Here in this street, the indefatigable biographer informed me, Joanne had lived at No 59 with the man she had married some time after



arriving in Portugal, Jorge Arantes - who, though sometimes described as a journalist, was at the time in fact a journalism student. It is not my aim to delve into the private lives of the famous, and I will here recall only the known facts that the marriage lasted just over one year, from 1992 to 1993, and ended in separation and, finally, divorce, leaving Joanne the single mother whose later ascension from welfare cheques to riches has become a modern fairy-tale.

Rua do Duque de Saldanha is a pleasant, tree-lined residential street. No 59 is near the far end. It proved to be the right-hand portion of a two-storey terraced house, fronted with tiles, variously plain dark green and floral-patterned. There was no plaque and no name on the door, and here too the blinds were down. As I discreetly photographed the house from the other side, a boy and girl passed. I told them who had lived there, and they had at least vaguely heard of Harry Potter. I carried on to the end of the street, to take in the view of the Douro river that opens up just a few steps from the Arantes couple's former house.



On the opposite side is the gate of Prado do Repouso (Field of Repose). Palm-trees invite communion with the departed, and the fact that almost opposite may remind her readers of the graveyard which plays a prominent role in 'Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire'. To the right of the cemetery stands an angular, grey-and-white, classically Portuguese edifice which proved, on inspection, to be the *'Real Colégio de Nossa Senhora da Graça dos Meninos Órfãos da Cidade do Porto, Fundado em 23-5-1651, Património Municipal'* (The Royal College of Our Gracious Lady for the Orphan Children of the City of Porto, Founded on 23 May 1651, Property of the City). So Joanne Rowling lived opposite not just a cemetery but an orphanage - and, even though we know she had conceived the image of the orphan Harry before ever she stepped on Portuguese soil, we can still speculate, if we wish, that the physical presence of an orphanage so near her house here may have reinforced and strengthened the image of the boy orphan (*'menino órfão'*) in her mind's eye.



a cemetery, the invite Joanne lived

My mission completed, I entered a bar next to the cemetery to imbibe a quick *bica* (bitter expresso) and change my camera film, and then began to retrace my steps back down Rua do Duque de Saldanha. On the pavement, right opposite No 59, a group of dark-clad old women stood staring at a black-and-white cat. It was proudly and playfully ... rolling! I was unable to prevent myself from thinking of the opening scene of the very first Harry Potter book, and the cat standing at the corner of Privet Drive, reading a map. Had I just been vouchsafed a glimpse of Professor McGonagall in her Animagus guise? The cat rolled back and forth in infinite content, happy to be the centre of attention. I photographed the feline artist, and

slowly made my way back to the centre of what will now, for me at least, always be Joanne Rowling's city of Porto.

Note

Sean Smith's 'J.K. Rowling: A Biography' (London: Michael O'Mara, 2001) devotes its sixth chapter (pp. 101-117) to Joanne's years in Portugal. I could not have written this article without the detailed information provided by this book, though I do feel obliged to point out that a number of slips of nomenclature suggest that the author is not familiar with the Portuguese language, while the title of the chapter, 'Love in a Warm Climate', suggests that he does not know Portugal too well either, since Porto, perched on the Atlantic coast, is for most of the year a decidedly cold and rainy place to be. Even so, his account traces the story with clarity and dedication.

Joanne Rowling's time in Portugal does not seem so far to have left many obvious traces in the Harry Potter books. However, Sean Smith advances (pp. 109-110) the interesting hypothesis that the title of 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' may have been suggested by the poem 'Pedra filosofal' by António Gedeão, well-known to Portuguese music listeners in a setting recorded in 1970 by the singer Manuel Freire, an exponent of the neo-folk 'Música Popular Portuguesa' movement: it is by no means unlikely that Joanne would have known this song-poem from nocturnal performances in the bars of Porto's riverside 'Ribeira' quarter.

I have another Portuguese detail to add. In 'Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets' (UK edition, London: Bloomsbury, 1998, p. 114), we learn that the historic founder of Slytherin, one of Hogwarts' four 'houses', was a famous, but dark and disreputable wizard, going by the name of Salazar Slytherin. Slytherin is the house closest to the Dark Side, harbouring the most unsavoury characters. On p. 115, Harry's friend Ron declares: 'I always knew Salazar Slytherin was a twisted old loony'. The interest here lies in the evident reference to António de Oliveira Salazar, the fascist dictator who ruled Portugal (officially as Prime Minister) from 1932 to 1968, and one of whose most notorious policies was deliberately to maintain his country's illiteracy rate at a level quite anomalously high for Europe. Joanne's years in Portugal, then, furnished her with a suggestive and suitable name to bestow on an avatar of evil - for which circumstantial connection, of course, the amiable and hospitable Portuguese people should not in any way be blamed, while we may also recall that the Harry Potter books, with their well-attested track-record of enticing children back from the flickering screen to the pleasures of the written word, have had an effect quite contrary to the anti-literacy strategies of the Salazars of this world.

For those who read Portuguese, invaluable historical and documentary information on the Rua de Santa Catarina and the Café Majestic may be found in Alexandrino Brochado's fascinating, profusely illustrated volume 'Santa Catarina: História de uma rua' (Porto: Livraria Telos Editora, 1996): perhaps a future edition will add the traces of Joanne Rowling! The Café Majestic also features (though with no mention of Joanne or Harry) in an interesting and widely-praised film of 2001, 'Porto da minha infância' ('Porto of my childhood'), by the veteran director Manoel de Oliveira.