

J.K. Rowling and 'The Ickabog'

■ What to know about the new, not-'Harry Potter'-story that kids are invited to illustrate

By Ellen Gray
The Philadelphia Inquirer

The publication of a new J.K. Rowling story has often been accompanied by lines of robed children, parents and wizard wannabes waiting outside bookshops to pluck the first volumes from the piles at the stroke of midnight.

That won't be happening, or not at least until late fall, for "The Ickabog," a children's story that the "Harry Potter" author is releasing free online to entertain kids in lockdown. Her plan is to continue to publish "a chapter (or two, or three) every weekday" until July 10.

"I think 'The Ickabog' lends itself well to serialisation because it was written as a read-aloud book (unconsciously shaped, I think, by the way I read it to my own children), but it's suitable for 7-9 year olds to read to themselves," Rowling writes on her website, jkrowling.com.

As of Thursday morning, eight chapters of "The Ickabog" were available at theickabog.com, where young readers are also being invited to help illustrate the story, for possible use in editions to be published in November.

Rowling is pledging her royalties to help groups that "have been particularly impacted by the pandemic."

What we know so far: "The Ickabog" has introduced a spoiled, not very bright king, Fred the Fearless (he added the fearless part), who rules the largely prosperous kingdom of Cornucopia. It has also laid out the legend of the monster Ickabog, who figures in stories that have been passed down by generations of the far less prosperous Marshlanders who live on the fringes of Cornucopia.

Where it came from: "The idea for 'The Ickabog' came to me while



J.K. Rowling

I was still writing 'Harry Potter,'" writes Rowling.

Her plan had been to publish it after the last of the "Potter" series, but instead she decided to take a break from writing for children. (She published the novel "The Casual Vacancy" and has been writing a series of detective stories under the pen name Robert Galbraith.) "The Ickabog" manuscript went into the attic. When she brought up the idea recently of publishing it online, her two children, now teenagers, were "touchingly enthusiastic."

How kids can get involved: Illustrations by artists 7-12 years old can be entered by their parents or guardians to a contest run by the book's publishers for possible inclusion in their country's edition

of the book. Details can be found at theickabog.com/competition.

In the U.S., entries may be sub-

"The Ickabog" by J.K. Rowling

What: J.K. Rowling (of Harry Potter fame) is releasing free chapters online of her new story for children to enjoy during lockdown. She will continue through July 10.

Information: theickabog.com

mitted to Scholastic at scholastic.com/illustrationcompetition. According to Scholastic, "the 34 winning illustrations will be included in the print and e-book editions of J.K. Rowling's "The Ickabog," to be published by Scholastic in November. Each winner will also receive a copy of the book signed by the author and a prize package of \$650 worth of Scholastic books for the entrant's school or library of choice."

How to show Rowling your child's (or even your) drawings: on Twitter. Rowling's not in charge of the judging, but she's inviting parents to post their kids' illustrations with the hashtag #TheIckabog. And she's started sharing some and commenting on them, including some from those too young, or too old, to enter the contest.

What it means for booksellers: "It does me zero good" so far, said Richard De Wyngaert, owner of

Philadelphia's Head House Books, on Wednesday, "but that's all right. I like the sentiment behind it."

In addition, "I love what she did for generations of readers" with the Harry Potter series, he said. "It's the only one like that in my lifetime, so broad and multigenerational."

He's not personally crazy about the concept of serializing books. "The beauty of it is that it's certainly strengthening the delayed-gratification muscles," but "I don't like to read that way. That's just me. I'm a binge reader. I was thinking of waiting till it was over," he said. "You don't want someone else to dictate the tempo of your reading."

De Wyngaert's business has pivoted online during the shutdown. He's looking forward to carrying (and reading) "The Ickabog" in November.

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