

# J.K. Rowling, Chekhov's Gun and the Joys of Rereading

*"Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.[1.Valentine T. Bill (1987), Chekhov: The Silent Voice of Freedom, Philosophical Library]" (Anton Chekhov)*

**(Editor's note: Major spoilers are included in this article. You have been warned.)**

The only thing I have found more enjoyable than reading through the *Harry Potter* series is reading through it many times.

My reasons for reading it twice a year or so (with the intention of continuing to do so a minimum of once a year until I die) are legion and normal. I get just as many chills the fifth time I read Harry call for his Firebolt during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament as I did the first time I read it. I got just as emotional during Dobby's death and during Snape's final pensieve memories the last time I read as the first time.

Some things are better when I reread, such as the final battle between Harry and Voldemort, which is so rich in detail it had my head spinning the first time. I needed several times to grasp it all. Sometimes I just miss details until I reread, as I didn't note until about my third reading that Ron put his socks on Dobby's feet before they buried him, a detail so touching and impacting I cannot believe I missed it the first

times.

But on that note, there is one thing that stands out about *Harry Potter* than causes me to adore rereading beyond the typical reasons. They call it "Chekhov's Gun" and J.K. Rowling was a master at introducing seemingly minor plot devices in passing that turn out to be hugely significant hundreds and sometimes thousands of pages later. Some were major their first appearance but even then their magnitude after the gun goes off blows me away as I reread.

I am pretty much the opposite of someone like Sherlock Holmes; I don't notice detail immediately and that actually helps to get lost in stories while reading and watching TV and movies. Plot twists and fired guns catch me completely off guard. Which is a glorious feeling. And Rowling was a magician at these things for over 4000 pages. I remember during my first reading my wife told me: "Rowling doesn't introduce anything by accident. It all has a purpose."

And while her plot twists are already legendary, and as they are so well covered, I want to focus on these Chekhov's Guns, which is trope of a different color. There are many and I'll mention several but not nearly all. These are more or less my favorites after having been through the series several times (note I may have some minor details wrong on these and if I do I welcome correction):

### **The Vanishing Cabinet(s)**

First mentioned in Book 2 when Harry hid in the one in Borgin and Burkes after he ended up in in Knockturn Alley by mistake. The Hogwarts twin is mentioned that same book when Harry is in Filch's office for getting in trouble for spreading mud on the floor. They become a bigger yet still minor part of Book 5 when the Weasley twins trap Slytherin Montague in the one at school, where as a result he realizes there are two and that

they connect. And that becomes the basis for how Draco uses them to help kill Dumbledore in Book 6. Amazing.

### **The Necklace at Borgin and Burkes**

In the very same scene on page 52 of *Chamber*, Draco notices the poisonous necklace that he eventually uses in Book 6 to try to kill Dumbledore, but instead nearly kills Katie Bell.

### **The Hand of Glory**

Yet again first mentioned in Book 2 when Draco sees it in B&B (how insignificant these details—in such a short scene—seem at the time!) Then, early on in Book 6, Ron mentions that Draco has a HoG. And it becomes a crucial part of how he foils Harry's friends from stopping him in the climactic scene.

### **The Tiara on the Mannequin**

This one and the next one win for “Most random, easy-to-overlook-while-reading detail that becomes monumental later on”. In Book 6 when Snape has Harry trapped for using the Half Blood Prince's potions book, Harry hides in in the Room of Hidden things and marks its location by noting it is next to a bust with a wig and tiara. Finding that Tiara is as crucial to anything in Book 7, as it was a horcrux.

[Not quite as cool but still on topic is that halfway through Book 7 Luna casually mentions the “lost diadem of Ravenclaw” in passing and her father was wearing a (sort of) replica.]

### **The Locket at 12 Grimmauld Place**

The mention of the locket is so brief in Book 5 when they are cleaning the Order's Headquarters that I've twice read the book looking for its mention and still missed it. It's so brief and camouflaged by a million other details on the page that only the most brilliant, hyper observant people likely remembered it the first time through when Hermione recalls it in Book 7. What a gun to go off in the last book! Covering pages and pages and chapters and chapters of finding the locket, stealing it back, carrying it around and then finally destroying it. And think of all that happens in those pages: the break into the Ministry, Ron leaving, Ron coming back, the doe, the sword, etc.

### **Dumbledore's Broken Nose**

3,500 pages or so between gun appearance (the very first appearance of Dumbledore in the first book mentions his nose) and gun going off (Rita Skeeter publishes that Aberforth punched Albus coffinside at Ariana's funeral). Incredible!

### **Aberforth and Goats**

Not as crucial to the plot but quite hilarious: In *Goblet* Dumbledore references his brother getting in trouble for illegal charms on a goat. In the next book, Harry notices that the Hog's Head smells like goats (and that the barkeep looks strangely familiar). In the final book, we find out Aberforth is the barman for the Hog's Head. So clever!

### **Dumbledore's Prophecy About Wormtail**

As Harry bemoans letting Wormtail go free at the end of Book 3, Dumbledore assures him one day he will be grateful he did so. And in Book 7, thousands of pages later, Wormtail's mercy

in return helps them escape certain death.

### **Dumbledore and Snape's Argument**

In Book 6 Hagrid lets it slip that they were arguing so Harry thinks it's a reason to not trust Snape. Book 7 clears up that they argued about whether Snape would kill Dumbledore.

### **Dumbledore references the Room of Requirement**

In Book 4 at the Yule Ball, Dumbledore casually claims he found a secret room to use the bathroom when he needed it most. In Books 5 and 7 that very room, the "Come and Go Room" (or "Room of Requirement"), becomes the room for the Hogwarts anti-Voldemort movement. Thank you, Dobby. And sadly, in Book 6 it is used to plot the eventual death of Dumbledore.

### **The Diary**

This is a huge gun shown in Book 2 (marvel at the moment towards the beginning of the book when they are going to King's Cross and Ginny forgets the diary at home and they have to go back and get it) that goes off at the end of that book. But even more impressively, it goes off again in as it ends up being deemed a horcrux in Book 6.

### **Marvelo Gaunt's Ring**

Another major gun first mentioned in Book 6 in a pensieve memory, it is so significant that it turns out to be a Hallow *and* a Horcrux by Book 7.

## **Why is he the “Bloody” Baron?**

Book 1 mentions the Bloody Baron is covered in blood and even asks why he is covered in blood. We don't get the answer for nearly 4,000 pages. Stunning!

## **Harry's Scar Prickling**

This one is very early, less than halfway through the very first book and of course we think it has to do with Snape. But we learn quickly that it does not. And it goes off over and over, Rowling adding layer upon layer to why Harry and Voldemort are connected. So while not as obscure as many others, I mention it because amazingly, the final firing of the gun (and the richest detail) isn't until the penultimate chapter, at King's Cross in Book 7. We find out that Harry was the horcrux Voldemort never intended to make. This makes reading about the first prickling of his scar in the Great Hall his first day in Book 1 so much more meaningful. And speaking of this...

## **Dumbledore Tells Harry (Essentially) That He is a Horcrux...in Book Two**

This is probably my favorite of all. Read this dialogue, with the end of Book 7 in mind:

“You can speak Parseltongue, Harry,” said Dumbledore calmly, “because Lord Voldemort can speak Parseltongue. Unless I'm much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do I'm sure.”

“Voldemort put a bit of himself in me?” Harry said, thunderstruck.

“It certainly seems so.”

Mind. Blown.

Did I miss some you consider your favorites? Let us know below!