

Will the real Harry Potter please stand up?

By Cathy Eden

British author JK Rowling is said to have based her best-selling character, Harry Potter, on a child who was at school with her.

What better candidate than serious Stephen Potter, by his own account the scrawniest kid at Rowling's school, Wyedean Comprehensive, who spent every spare moment peering into the school telescope?

Potter, now 33, could have turned out to be unremarkable, but he's so gratifyingly Harry Potter-ish that if Rowling is stuck for a future scenario for her creation, she need look no further.

On the day I meet him he twirls a computer mouse

The man who might have been Harry's prototype is lean and dark-haired, with bright eyes and a noble, wizardly nose. His hands are graceful, and his elongated fingers just made for twirling a wand.

On the day I meet him he twirls a computer mouse instead to show me an image on his screen: information being transmitted from a distant star that he translates as part of his research into cataclysmic variables.

It would be taxing, even to Rowling's fertile imagination, to come up with a more apt occupation for a graduate of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but here it is: Stephen Potter is an astronomer on a three-year contract at the SA Astronomical Observatory in Cape Town, and he's deeply committed to the ongoing quest to journey back to the beginning of time.

"I would love to have gone to Hogwarts," he says as we leave his office and cross the wood-panelled library that houses titles like High Energy Astrophysics and New and Exotic Phenomena. But he did the next best thing: After completing his masters degree at the University of London, he enrolled for a PhD at the Mullard Space Science Laboratory, a rambling establishment on a remote country estate in Surrey.

And how did he travel back and forth? By train, of course. At Mullard, surprise, surprise, he met and fell in love with Hermione - er, Encarni - the brainiest girl in the class.

'I would love to have gone to Hogwarts'

"Are you ready for some magic?" asks Potter as we enter the old observatory that scanned the skies before the new facility at Sutherland was built.

With a flick of the wrist he sets the floor moving, and we rise effortlessly towards the great telescope under the domed roof. Even without a Nimbus 2000 in sight, it's almost too good to be true.

Things out of this world are the norm for Stephen Potter. He acknowledges that astronomers need to use their imagination to translate the data they receive, but he takes daily wonders in his stride. "Did you notice the picture on the wall above my computer?" he asks. "I photographed the Sutherland observatory against a crimson sky at three in the morning. The Aurora Australis is magic to most people, but it's not mysterious to me."

The call to astronomy, Potter says, is much like the call to wizardry.

"The further you look into deep space, the closer you come to the beginning of time," he says. "Whenever I go to Sutherland, I'm overwhelmed by the enormity of what I see. If I didn't feel that way I'd probably leave astronomy and get a decent, well-paid job, but the urge to know more drives me on."

"I feel I'm lucky: to know the universe is to know God. If you are looking for God, this is a pretty good place to search, because it forces you to ask questions about the source of all things."

When the search for the original Harry Potter led the moviemakers to contact Stephen Potter's mother, she honestly denied having a child called Harry. She didn't reveal that her Stephen had been at Tutshill School and at Wyedean Comprehensive with the celebrated author.

Stephen recalls being the only Potter in the school at the time, and has vivid memories of the intimidating astronomy teacher, Mr Nettleship (known as "Stinger") on whom Rowling built the character of Professor Snape. But he does not remember the older Joanne Kathleen at all, even though she was head girl in her final year at school.

Neither is he in the least put out by having missed the opportunity for fame, perhaps even to star in the screen adaptation of a future book, in which Harry Potter turns out to be a dedicated astronomer, living in darkest Africa.

"I don't want to be an actor," he says firmly. "I want to be an astronaut."

Specifically, he wants a job at Nasa, and to achieve this goal he's willing to cultivate the characteristics and skills that Nasa requires of its astronauts.

"A mission specialist on the ground would be my route to success, but ultimately, my dream is to fly ..."

While he's shaping his out-of-the-ordinary career, perhaps JK Rowling is boning up on her cataclysmic variables for the final bestseller in which her hero takes to the sky.

Even if Stephen Potter did not provide the inspiration for Harry, she'd be wise to make him her model now. Sooner or later, Harry will outgrow Quidditch, and when that happens, nothing less than a master magician and galactic traveller will do to guide him across the next frontier.

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