

# **The story of Dolores Jane Umbridge**

**J.K. Rowling**

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Dolores Jane Umbridge was the eldest child and only daughter of Orford Umbridge, a wizard, and Ellen Cracknell, a Muggle, who also had a Squib son. Dolores' parents were unhappily married, and Dolores secretly despised both of them: Orford for his lack of ambition (he had never been promoted, and worked in the Department of Magical Maintenance at the Ministry of Magic), and her mother, Ellen, for her flightiness, untidiness, and Muggle lineage. Both Orford and his daughter blamed Ellen for Dolores's brother's lack of magical ability, with the result that when Dolores was fifteen, the family split down the middle, Orford and Dolores remaining together, and Ellen vanishing back into the Muggle world with her son. Dolores never saw her mother or brother again, never spoke of either of them, and henceforth pretended to all she met that she was a pure-blood.

An accomplished witch, Dolores joined the Ministry of Magic directly after she left Hogwarts, taking a job as a lowly intern in the Improper Use of Magic Office. Even at seventeen, Dolores was judgemental, prejudiced and sadistic, although her conscientious attitude, her saccharine manner towards her superiors, and the ruthlessness and stealth with which she took credit for other people's work soon gained her advancement. Before she was thirty, Dolores had been promoted to Head of the office, and it was but a short step from there to ever more senior positions in the management of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. By this time, she had persuaded her father to take early retirement, and by making him a small financial allowance, she ensured that he dropped quietly out of sight. Whenever she was asked (usually by workmates who did not like her) 'are you related to that Umbridge who used to mop the floors here?' she would smile her sweetest, laugh, and deny any connection whatsoever, claiming that her deceased father had been a distinguished member of the Wizengamot. Nasty things tended to happen to people who asked about Orford, or anything that Dolores did not like talking about, and people who wanted to remain on her good side pretended to believe her version of her ancestry.

In spite of her best efforts to secure the affections of one of her superiors (she never cared particularly which of them it was, but knew that her own status and security would be advanced with a powerful husband), Dolores never succeeded in marrying. While they valued her hard work and ambition, those who got to know her best found it difficult to like her very much. After a glass of sweet sherry, Dolores was always prone to spout very uncharitable views, and even those who were anti-Muggle found themselves shocked by some of Dolores's suggestions, behind closed doors, of the treatment that the non-magical community deserved.

As she grew older and harder, and rose higher within the Ministry, Dolores's taste in little girlish accessories grew more and more pronounced; her office became a place of frills and furbelows, and she liked anything decorated with kittens (though found the real thing inconveniently messy). As the Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge became increasingly anxious and paranoid that Albus Dumbledore had ambitions to supersede him, Dolores managed to claw her way to the very heart of power, by stoking both Fudge's vanity and his fears, and presenting herself as one of the few he could trust.

Dolores's appointment as Inquisitor at Hogwarts gave full scope, for the first time in her life, for her prejudices and her cruelty. She had not enjoyed her time at school, where she had been overlooked for all positions of responsibility, and she relished the chance to return and wield power over those who had not (as she saw it) given her her due.

Dolores has what amounts to a phobia of beings that are not quite, or wholly, human. Her distaste for the half-giant Hagrid, and her terror of centaurs, reveal a terror of the unknown and the wild. She is an immensely controlling person, and all who challenge her authority and world-view must, in her opinion, be punished. She actively enjoys subjugating and humiliating others, and except in their declared allegiances, there is little to choose between her and Bellatrix Lestrange.

Dolores's time at Hogwarts ended disastrously, because she overreached the remit Fudge had given her, stepping outside the bounds of her own authority, carried away with a fanatical sense of self-purpose. Shaken but unrepentant after a catastrophic end to her Hogwarts career, she returned

to a Ministry, which had been plunged into turmoil due to the return of Lord Voldemort.

In the change of regimes that followed Fudge's forced resignation, Dolores was able to slip back into her former position at the Ministry. The new Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour, had more immediate problems pressing in on him than Dolores Umbridge. Scrimgeour was later punished for this oversight, because the fact that the Ministry had never punished Dolores for her many abuses of power seemed to Harry Potter to reveal both its complacency and its carelessness. Harry considered Dolores's continuing employment, and the lack of any repercussions for her behaviour at Hogwarts, a sign of the Ministry's essential corruption, and refused to cooperate with the new Minister because of it (Dolores is the only person, other than Lord Voldemort, to leave a permanent physical scar on Harry, having forced him to cut the words 'I must not tell lies' on the back of his own hand during detention).

Dolores was soon enjoying life at the Ministry more than ever. When the Ministry was taken over by the puppet Minister Pius Thicknesse, and infiltrated by the Dark Lord's followers, Dolores was in her true element at last. Correctly judged, by senior Death Eaters, to have much more in common with them than she ever had with Albus Dumbledore, she not only retained her post but was given extra authority, becoming Head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission, which was in effect a kangaroo court that imprisoned all Muggle-borns on the basis that they had 'stolen' their wands and their magic.

It was as she sat in judgement of another innocent woman that Harry Potter finally attacked Dolores in the very heart of the Ministry, and stole from her the Horcrux she had unwittingly been wearing.

With the fall of Lord Voldemort, Dolores Umbridge was put on trial for her enthusiastic co-operation with his regime, and convicted of the torture, imprisonment and deaths of several people (some of the innocent Muggle-borns she sentenced to Azkaban did not survive their ordeal).

**Birthday:** 26th August

**Wand:** Birch and dragon heartstring, eight inches long

**Hogwarts house:** Slytherin

**Special abilities:** Her punishment quill is of her own invention

**Parentage:** Muggle mother, wizard father

**Family:** Unmarried, no children

**Hobbies:** Collecting the 'Frolicsome Feline' ornamental plate range, adding flounces to fabric and frills to stationary objects, inventing instruments of torture

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### **J.K. Rowling's thoughts on Dolores Jane Umbridge**

Once, long ago, I took instruction in a certain skill or subject (I am being vague as vague can be, for reasons that are about to become obvious), and in doing so, came into contact with a teacher or instructor whom I disliked intensely on sight.

The woman in question returned my antipathy with interest. Why we took against each other so instantly, heartily and (on my side, at least) irrationally, I honestly cannot say. What sticks in my mind is her pronounced taste for twee accessories. I particularly recall a tiny little plastic bow slide, pale lemon in colour that she wore in her short curly hair. I used to stare at that little slide, which would have been appropriate to a girl of three, as though it was some kind of repellent physical growth. She was quite a stocky woman, and not in the first flush of youth, and her tendency to wear frills where (I felt) frills had no business to be, and to carry undersized handbags, again as though they had been borrowed from a child's dressing-up box, jarred, I felt, with a personality that I found the reverse of sweet, innocent and ingenuous.

I am always a little wary when talking about these kinds of sources of inspiration, because it is infuriating to hear yourself misinterpreted in ways that can cause other people a great deal of hurt. This woman was NOT 'the real Dolores Umbridge'. She did not look like a toad, she was never sadistic or vicious to me or anyone else, and I never heard her express a single view

in common with Umbridge (indeed, I never knew her well enough to know much about her views or preferences, which makes my dislike of her even less justifiable). However, it is true to say that I borrowed from her, then grossly exaggerated, a taste for the sickly sweet and girlish in dress, and it was that tiny little pale lemon plastic bow that I was remembering when I perched the fly-like ornament on Dolores Umbridge's head.

I have noticed more than once in life that a taste for the ineffably twee can go hand-in-hand with a distinctly uncharitable outlook on the world. I once shared an office with a woman who had covered the wall space behind her desk with pictures of fluffy kitties; she was the most bigoted, spiteful champion of the death penalty with whom it has ever been my misfortune to share a kettle. A love of all things saccharine often seems present where there is a lack of real warmth or charity.

So Dolores, who is one of the characters for whom I feel purest dislike, became an amalgam of traits taken from these, and a variety of sources. Her desire to control, to punish and to inflict pain, all in the name of law and order, are, I think, every bit as reprehensible as Lord Voldemort's unvarnished espousal of evil.

Umbridge's names were carefully chosen. 'Dolores' means sorrow, something she undoubtedly inflicts on all around her. 'Umbridge' is a play on 'umbrage' from the British expression 'to take umbrage', meaning offence. Dolores is offended by any challenge to her limited world-view; I felt her surname conveyed the pettiness and rigidity of her character. It is harder to explain 'Jane'; it simply felt rather smug and neat between her other two names.