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Harry Potter Bewitches Guantanamo Bay Prisoners

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WASHINGTON - Harry Potter has bewitched detainees at the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, where tales of the young wizard and mysteries by Agatha Christie top the list of most popular books, a prison librarian said on Tuesday.

"Harry Potter is a popular title among some of the detainee population," said the librarian, a civilian contractor identified only as "Lorie" who works at the prison camp for foreign terrorism suspects at the U.S. naval base in Cuba.

Lorie said the popularity of the best-selling Harry Potter books, which recount the adventures of a boy wizard as he triumphs over the powers of evil, was matched only by the prisoners' passion for Agatha Christie, some of whose murder mysteries are set in the Middle East.

The Guantanamo Bay prison -- which has come under fierce attack by human rights groups for its treatment and indefinite detention of prisoners -- holds about 510 suspects from 40 countries. Most are from Afghanistan and Arab states.

But even this remote prison has not escaped the world-wide frenzy over the escapades of Harry Potter and his friends at the Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft. The sixth book in the series by author J.K. Rowling, which went on sale last month, is the fastest-selling book of all time.

"We have Harry Potter in four languages, English, French, Farsi and Russian. We have it on order in Arabic. We do not have books 5 and 6 in the series, at this time. We have had several detainees read the series," Lorie said in a written response to questions from Reuters.

"One prisoner has requested the movies," she said.

News of the series' popularity was first reported by The Washington Times on Monday.

Asked what other books were among the prisoners' favorites, Lorie said, "We have 12 different Agatha Christie titles in Arabic that are very popular. Also 1001 Arabian Nights."

Overall, the library contains 1,200 books, 164 magazines and 40 videos.

The prisoners do not need library privileges to read the Islamic holy book, the Koran, which is a "basic issue item" that each prisoner keeps in his cell, she said.

The United States opened the Guantanamo prison in January 2002. A total of 242 detainees have been transferred out of the prison to other countries either to be freed or for continued detention, while approximately 510 remain at Guantanamo, according to the Pentagon. Many have been held for more than three years and only four have been charged.

Human rights groups have assailed the United States for the indefinite detentions, and former Guantanamo prisoners have complained they were tortured, a charge the military denies.

Some critics have urged the Bush administration to shut the camp down, saying its treatment of prisoners encourages hatred toward the West and bolsters support for militant violence.

