

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Review by Jennie A. Levine, June 7, 2004

I still think everyone needs to read the book. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* hits closer to the mark than the previous two films in the Harry Potter series, but it is still far from satisfying for a true fan of the books.

The plot is simple on one level: Evil villain Voldemort's most loyal servant, convicted murderer Sirius Black, has escaped from Azkaban (the wizard prison) and is out to get Harry. Because of this, the Ministry of Magic has ordered that the Dementors (the soul-sucking Azkaban guards) patrol the entrances to the Hogwarts grounds. Harry spends the year bonding with the understanding new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, going to classes, dealing with puberty, and following sightings of Black. It all ends, of course, with a showdown when Sirius Black manages to trap Harry, who has, of course, been wandering the school grounds when expressly told not to do so.

But it's not that simple. Things are not always what they seem in the Harry Potter universe, and there is a time travel element that adds to the complexity of the plot. *Prisoner of Azkaban* is the book where Harry receives a significant information dump regarding the lives of his parents, and trying to fit all of that into the confines of a movie must have been difficult for screenwriter Steve Kloves. He does a decent job of combining some of the scenes and drawing out the really important facts. At the same time, one has to wonder why he felt the need to use his own dialogue in places where Rowling's is more appropriate. Would a thirteen-year-old boy really ramble on to a friend about his dream house in the country? Why does 'random Gryffindor boy #1' have more speaking lines than a more familiar secondary character? And at times, it seems like Kloves is writing his own series, entitled 'Hermione Granger: Super Witch!' And someone who hasn't read the books might wonder why Harry and best buddy Ron hang around together - Ron's undying loyalty to Harry and his supportiveness to both of his friends are subdued in the movies.

In a scene where the grouchy Professor Snape calls Hermione an "insufferable know-it-all," Ron responds under his breath: "He's got a point." In the books, Ron stands up to Snape, criticizes him for chastising Hermione, and ends up in detention. And for the record, in the books, it's Ron, and not Hermione, who blocks Harry when confronted by Sirius Black and exclaims, "If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us too!" If the movie were *not* based on a book series, the viewer might leave the theater wondering about some of the plot holes. But if you want to know the connection between Harry's father and the stag-Patronus, or how Professor Lupin and Sirius Black were so well-informed about the Marauder's Map, the answers are in the books.

Director Alfonso Cuarón has expanded, embellished, and manipulated the Hogwarts landscape so that it is finally as ethereal and magical as portrayed in the books. The Dementors are truly frightening. As a matter of fact, the movie is rated PG, but a PG-13 rating might have been more appropriate, not because there is violence, but because the themes in the movie, such as the plotline surrounding Buckbeak the Hippogriff, are very mature and complex. The magic in this movie finally seems organic - it is a part of the characters and their environment, rather than being something that they merely 'perform'. The acting is wonderful. Daniel Radcliffe, as Harry, finally seems secure in his skin. Harry is a boy who wants a family, and Radcliffe portrays this with skill and emotion. Emma Watson is spirited, intelligent, and old beyond her years as Hermione, and Rupert Grint (Ron) does a wonderful job of making the most of the material that he is given to work with. The dynamic between the three as true friends really shines through in their body language and facial expressions.

And the adults. *Prisoner of Azkaban* may be the favorite book in the series for many grown-ups because of these characters, and they do not disappoint in the movie. Professor Lupin, the teacher everyone likes and remembers, is played with grace and humor by David Thewlis. Alan Rickman continues to act Professor Snape to greasy perfection. Gary Oldman performs the part of a man locked up in prison for twelve years with a convincing madness. And watching the three of them (Thewlis, Rickman, and Oldman) play off

each other is a real treat. And there was much discussion about the replacement of Richard Harris (who died last year) with Michael Gambon as the elderly and wise Headmaster Dumbledore. Gambon is the Dumbledore of the books - slightly mischievous, slightly goofy, and slightly scruffy, but nonetheless the wisest and most authoritative person around. One has the feeling that Emma Thompson, who plays the airy Divination teacher, Professor Trelawney, walked on the set one day, and just improvised her role to perfection.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban is a new direction in the Harry Potter film series. The films can never replace the books, but at least, with this one, they have taken a giant step forward.

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