

MUSIC & MOVIES



This image released by Warner Bros Entertainment shows Eddie Redmayne in a scene from, 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them.' — AP photos



This image released by Warner Bros. Entertainment shows Eddie Redmayne, left, and Katherine Waterston in a scene from, 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them.'

Film Review

'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them'

Just when you thought the world of Harry Potter couldn't get any darker, along comes a bleak-as-soot spin-off that makes the earlier series look like kids' stuff. Borrowing its title from one of the textbooks Potter studied at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, "Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them" marks the first screenplay written by JK Rowling herself. Though the world-renown novelist had always kept a tight rein on how those adapting her Potter stories went about their task, this assignment gives her the unprecedented ability to address her massive global fanbase directly, while current events have given her something more substantive to say.

It's 1926, and Scamander arrives at Ellis Island with a bottomless suitcase full of illegal "livestock," ranging from a mischievous Niffler (a naughty duck-billed marsupial with a nose for treasure) to a giant storm-causing Thunderbird, whose keeper intends to release back into the wild somewhere far from people in Arizona. But the United States is notoriously intolerant when it comes to magic. (Remember the Salem witch trials?) As a precaution, all beasts have been outlawed by MACUSA, the Yankee equivalent of the Ministry of Magic, with stiff penalties for any who disobey.

Absent-mindedness

Scamander means well, but he's a bit of a klutz and not nearly as careful as someone charged with keeping a menagerie of potentially dangerous creatures really ought to be. (If he were cleverer, he probably would have left behind those beasts capable of destroying New York City, such as the atom-bomb-like Obscurus, before traveling.) In his absent-mindedness, however, Scamander accidentally swaps suitcases with Jacob Kowalski (Dan Fogler), a No-Maj factory worker, who swiftly unleashes half a dozen or so of the animals into the streets—animals that have a nasty habit of leaping directly into the lenses of Philippe Rousselot's 3D cameras.

What follows may as well be a high-end, period-themed upgrade to the popular Pokemon GO iPhone game, as Scamander plays a freckle-faced, tweed-jacketed version of Ash Ketchum, scrambling to track down and recapture the escaped creatures before things get really out of hand. Things first spin out of control in an unusually complicated scene at the bank, where Rowling and Yates spin so many layers of surveillance-ex-auror Tina Goldstein (Katherine Waterston) spies on Scamander, who is following Kowalski, who in turn is being watched by a suspicious bank manager—that it starts to feel like trying to follow a piece of fruit as it passes through a blender.

Challenging ideas

Maintaining Yates as director lends a consistency to the project, and yet, it would have been refreshing to get a completely new take on Rowling's world with this series, especially considering how murky and self-serious they got in the final chapters. Still, Yates knows this world as well as anyone, and he excels at finding visual solutions for challenging ideas (whether it's how a witch might cook without an oven or a creature who either grows or shrinks to the available space). With all its ties to Harry Potter arcana, "Fantastic Beasts" has clearly been designed for the

most devoted of Rowling's fans, and though it may prove confusing to newcomers, the faithful will appreciate the fact the film never talks down to its audience.

Oddly, Rowling's script gives us practically no information about Scamander's backstory at this point, whereas Goldstein gets multiple flashbacks over the course of the film. That's probably because Rowling, whose world-building skills are rivaled only by George Lucas, appears to be primarily concerned with plot at this point, and Goldstein's memories serve the story, while this two-plus-hour-plus pilot evidently doesn't leave much room for the sort of character detail we'd all like to get about Scamander (whom Redmayne plays with stooped shoulders and a slightly bow-legged walk, easily winning sympathy for someone whose every judgment seems to endanger the fate of his kind).

These are times of intense superstition for No-Majs and wizards alike, and though the latter are progressive in their choice of leader, electing a mixed-race female president named Seraphina Piqueury (Carmen Ejogo), they're largely intolerant of No-Maj Americans—with good reason, as it turns out: There's a new sect of magic-fearing protesters on the rise, led by a zealot named Mary Lou Barebone (played with Puritanical self-righteousness by Samantha Morton). Outfitted like a character out of "The Crucible," Barebone steals/adopts children from the magic families she exposes, but doesn't keep nearly a close enough eye on her kids, leaving room for her deeply troubled "son" Credence (Ezra Miller) to hold private meetings with a powerful-and power-hungry-auror, Percival Graves (Colin Farrell).

Unsuspecting human population

Naturally, Graves is hiding one of those elaborate duplicitous agendas that Rowling loves to invent, raising the stakes for her protagonists—Scamander, Kowalski, Goldstein and Tina's sister, a mind-reading legilimens named Queenie (Alison Sudol, who looks the part of a period-appropriate showgirl) from merely recapturing all of those fantastic beasts on the loose to preventing Barebone and Graves from exposing America's magic underworld to the unsuspecting human population. Those are enormous stakes better suited to some of Scamander's powerful friends back home (like Albus Dumbledore, who may appear in future installments), and judging by the desperate look on Redmayne's face—reminiscent of a waiter attempting to balance a wobbly, six-foot stack of porcelain dishes—he's going to need considerable reinforcements before facing off against the series' new

ultra-villain, a powerful dark wizard named Gellert Grindelwald, who shows up just long enough to disappear.

Unsurprisingly, "Fantastic Beasts" amplifies both the strengths and weaknesses of Rowling's storytelling approach, which unfolds in the episodic style of vintage serials—a cliff-hanger-oriented tactic that works well in novels, where readers might otherwise be tempted to put the book down after each chapter, but feels less elegant on screen, since viewers invariably commit to taking in the entire story in one sitting. And yet, the writer has learned something from the Potter franchise, clearly going out of her way to establish a foundation that can be enriched and expanded upon in future films. One can hardly forget how powerful the revelation of Severus Snape's backstory was, enriched by having a master plan from the beginning, and here, we can sense the first glimmers of character details that will require several installments to take focus.

Races and religions

And yet, rather than simply promising a greater scope to come, "Fantastic Beasts" takes place in a world far larger than any of the Potter films, by virtue of both its heightened budget and setting, taking place in New York City right under the No-Maj's noses. It may be cute to obliviate witnesses one at a time, memory-wiping bystanders the way the Men in Black did after any alien sighting, to do so to a city at large smacks of cheating. Though Rowling takes the opportunity to introduce a few tolerance-oriented messages, one can't help but question the limits of the allegory: In the real world, bigots don't have a real reason to hate members of other races and religions, whereas wizards—however much we love them—pose a very real threat to normal people (grisly Obscurus attacks result in at least two deaths, and the destruction of large swaths of New York).

It's the same logical flaw that operates in both the Avengers and X-Men franchises, and Rowling doesn't have much to add ... yet. But considering that Queenie and Kowalski's romantic subplot is by far the film's most charming detail, there are clues that Rowling will have more to say on the subject of half-bloods—such as Harry Potter, born to mixed magic-and-Muggle parents—in the very near future. — Reuters



This image released by Warner Bros shows Colin Farrell, in a scene from, 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them.'

The first in an ambitious new pentaptych, whose five installments are all being handled by David Yates (the director responsible for the four ultra-bleak blockbusters that wrapped the Potter franchise), "Fantastic Beasts" does double-duty as yet another imagination-tickling fantasy adventure and a deeply troubled commentary on tolerance, fear, and bigotry in the world today. Focusing on a scatterbrained magizoologist named Newt Scamander (Eddie Redmayne), whose personal crusade for the protection of magical creatures will eventually lead him to publish the aforementioned guide, this often heavy-handed political allegory trades present-day England for Prohibition-era New York, at a time when conflicts between magic folk and No-Majs (American for "Muggle") are brewing—when the humans aren't fighting world wars among themselves, that is.

JAPAN ACTOR GIVES HIS ALL TO PLAY SHOGI MASTER IN 'SATOSHI'

The devotion Kenichi Matsuyama gave to portraying a shogi prodigy who lived a fearlessly single-minded life is clear in the months he spent practicing placing the pawns in the Japanese board game, immersing himself in the master's selfless view on death and gorging to gain weight. "He lived in a win-or-lose world, and for that, he had to give up so much, to be living on the edge, totally devoted to that one calling. That fascinated me. I wanted to give it my all," he told The Associated Press, ahead of the premiere of "Satoshi: A Move for Tomorrow." The film portraying the angst-filled story of Satoshi Murayama, who died of bladder cancer at 29 in 1998, opens at theaters around Japan on Nov 19. It closed the Tokyo International Film Festival and is being showcased at the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival, which runs through Nov 24. It was eight years in the making. And Matsuyama wanted the role right away.

Murayama had a serious kidney ailment since he was 5. He fell in love with shogi while hospitalized. His pudginess was a side-effect of his sickness and the medication he had to take all his life. Shogi, besides his love for manga, was about all he knew in life. He never had a girlfriend, he confesses in one scene. His last words were about shogi moves. His story is that universal one of a legend in any field, those so pure they would dedicate their entire lives, even risking death, for the pursuit of perfection. "He confronted his life head-on, and it wasn't about living for anyone else" said Matsuyama, who has starred in "Norwegian Wood," the 2010 coming-of-age film based on the best-selling novel by Haruki Murakami. "Mr Murayama always felt death close to him. That was his predicament."

Similar to the way boxers have to keep winning to remain champions, shogi players have to keep winning. That's why Murayama kept delaying treatment and then goes back to the shogi board barely a



This image released by 'Satoshi no Seishun' Film Partners shows Kenichi Matsuyama, portraying shogi master Satoshi Murayama, in a scene from the film, 'Satoshi: A Move for Tomorrow.' — AP photos

month after major surgery. He is in constant pain, but he doesn't stop. He doesn't want to cut his nails because, he says, even nails are trying to live. Matsuyama gained 26 kilograms (57 pounds) in about three months, speeding the transformation since it ruled out other acting jobs. Gorging on ice cream and rice cakes, he gradually felt he was morphing into Murayama, that all-out physical role-building that often grabs attention - Robert De Niro in "Raging Bull" or Charlize Theron in "Monster."

"Usually, I'm told to lose weight for this job, and we have to restrict our eating and drinking. But for this, I got to let all that go," Matsuyama said, looking lean and nimble, back at his usual weight of 66 kilograms

(145 pounds). "I ate potato chips in bed with my daughter." Becoming Murayama was about more than getting fat, although that brought him closer to the part. Even the way he walked, the way he carried himself, and the aches and twitches that followed, as well as the way his mind worked, all changed, recalled Matsuyama, whose marital partner Koyuki played opposite Tom Cruise in "The Last Samurai."

Thick silence

Matsuyama spent a year practicing the way shogi masters place their pawns, flat hexagon-shaped tiles, with that decisive click against the board, their fingers placed just so. The tension of the shogi scenes - two people facing off, sitting Japanese-style on the floor, in thick silence, except for the click-clicks against the board - is gripping, even to audiences unfamiliar with the art. The intense rivalry that's also a respectful love story with Yoshiharu Habu, still a shogi star today, drives the film, as dramatic as that between top-level athletes - Ted Williams versus Joe DiMaggio, Martina Navratilova versus Chris Evert, Bill Russell versus Wilt Chamberlain.

While Habu gained a reputation as a cool thinker, Murayama dazzled with his unpredictable intuitive moves. The movie closes with an unforgettable haunting scene. Soft wind whirrs on a street. A young shogi player, who had known and looked up to Murayama, senses Murayama's presence in the air, long after the master's death. And then there he is, standing as he always did, big, smiling, gazing at what's ahead, an everyday street corner that serves as a profound reminder that such a legacy, such passion for the game, is eternal. — AP



This file photo taken on November 9, 2016 shows actor Brad Pitt as he attends The 'Allied' Fan Event Presented by Paramount Pictures, in Westwood, California. — AP

Brad Pitt back in China after reported ban over Tibet film

Brad Pitt made his first promotional appearance for a movie in China since reportedly being banned over a film about Tibet almost 20 years ago. He spent 40 minutes giving autographs to Chinese fans yesterday and 20 minutes at a tightly controlled media event promoting his latest movie. The Chinese government reportedly didn't like his 1997 film, "Seven Years in Tibet," about an Austrian explorer's relationship with a young Dalai Lama, because of its portrayal of harsh Chinese rule in the Himalayan region.

Reporters were not allowed to ask questions at the event in Shanghai held to publicize the World War II romantic thriller "Allied." Interest is high in his recent split from Angelina Jolie Pitt. Instead, a host asked a string of questions about "Allied." Pitt did visit China two years ago to accompany his then-partner, who was on a publicity tour, but kept a very low profile. "Allied" debuts on Nov 23 in China, the US and some European and Asian countries. — AP



In this Nov 2, 2016 photo, Japanese actor Kenichi Matsuyama, left, and film director Yoshitaka Mori, right, are interviewed in Tokyo.



In this Oct 25, 2016 photo, film director Yoshitaka Mori, left, Japanese actors Kenichi Matsuyama, center, and Masahiro Higashide pose for photographers on the red carpet during Tokyo International Film Festival opening ceremony in Tokyo.