

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

By J.K. Rowling

Scholastic Press: 870 pages \$29.99

— Review by Stephen King —

Volume 5 of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series finds our hero and his friends cramming for (and agonizing over) their end-of-term exams, known at Hogwarts School as O.W.L.S (Ordinary Wizarding Levels). Of course Harry has a few other things on his plate — the growing menace of Voldemort, aka He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and his serious crush on the beautiful Cho Chang are only two of them — but here, in the spirit of the exam motif, are some questions (and answers) of my own. The first is the most important... and may, in the end, be the only one that matters in what is probably the most review-proof book to come along since a little bestseller called the Bible.

1.) Is Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix as good as the other Harry Potter books?

ANSWER: No. This one is actually quite a bit better. The tone is darker, and this has the unexpected — but very pleasing — effect of making Rowling's wit and playful black humor shine all the brighter. Where but in the world of Jo Rowling would one find deadly supernatural beings and their frightening familiars existing side-by-side with empty gloves that twiddle their thumbs impatiently, not to mention enchanted interdepartmental memos that fly from floor to floor in the Ministry of Magic as paper airplanes?

2.) Are there spoilers in this review?

ANSWER: Spoilers from a novelist who thinks the best dust-jacket flap copy ever written was "Gore Vidal's Duluth rips the lid off Dallas?" Perish the thought! But even if there were spoilers, would it matter? I'm betting that by the time this piece sees print, ninety per cent of the world's Potter-maniacs will have finished the novel, and will be starting their letters to Ms. Rowling asking when Volume 6 will be ready.

3.) You say this one's better than Azkaban, better than Goblet of Fire. Is there still room for improvement?

ANSWER: Heavens, yes. In terms of Ms. Rowling's imagination — which should be insured by Lloyd's of London (or perhaps The Incubus Insurance Company) for the 2 or 3 billion dollars it will ultimately be worth over the span of her creative lifetime, which should be long — she is now at the absolute top of her game. As a writer, however, she is often careless (characters never just put on their clothes; they always "get dressed at top speed") and oddly, almost sweetly, insecure. The part of speech that indicates insecurity ("Did you really hear me? Did you really understand me?") is the adverb, and Ms. Rowling seems to have never met one she didn't like, especially when it comes to dialogue attribution. Harry's godfather, Sirius, speaks "exasperatedly"; Mrs. Weasley (mother of Harry's best friend, Ron) speaks "sharply"; Tonks (a clumsy witch with punked-up, parti-colored hair) speaks "earnestly." As for Harry himself, he speaks quietly, automatically, nervously, slowly, quietly, and — often, given his current case of raging adolescence — ANGRILY.

These minor flaws of diction are endearing rather than annoying; they are the logical side-effect of a natural storyteller who is obviously bursting with crazily vivid ideas and having the time of her life. Yet Ms. Rowling could do better, and for the money, probably should. In any case there's no need for all those annoying adverbs (he said firmly), which pile up at the rate of eight or ten a page (over 870 pages, that comes to almost a novella's length of -ly words). Because, really — we hear, we understand, we enjoy. If the sales figures show nothing else, they show that. And if by the end of Chapter Three we don't know that Harry Potter is one utterly, completely, and pervasively angry young man, we haven't been paying attention.

4.) There's been a lot of discussion — some of it pretty warm — about whether or not kids, especially those under the age of ten, should be reading these novels, which contain vivid scenes of grief, terror, death, and even torture. What's your take on this?

ANSWER: My take on it is my mother's, actually. She used to say, "If they're old enough to understand what they're reading and to enjoy what they're understanding, leave 'em alone — it keeps 'em out from underfoot." I also subscribe to her corollary: "If it gives 'em nightmares, take it away."

The first couple of Potters were P4s. Three and four were P4-13s, and Phoenix makes it under the P4-13 wire by the skin of its teeth... or its fangs. Would I give these books to my own kids, were they still 9, 7, and 5? Yes, and without hesitation. The suspense here is never prurient; the scares are more than balanced off by the simple

decency of Harry, Ron, and Hermione. If teaching life-lessons is one of the jobs books do, then the Potter novels teach some fine ones about how to behave under pressure. And Rowling never preaches. Harry and his friends strike me as real children, not proto-Christian tin gods out of a Sunday School comic book. Hogwarts School is a long way from Bob Jones University, which is one of the reasons right-wingers decry the books.

A more interesting question is when did Ms. Rowling stop writing stories for children and start writing them for everyone, as Mark Twain did when he moved from Tom Sawyer to Huckleberry Finn and Lewis Carroll did when he moved from Alice in Wonderland to Through the Looking Glass? I'm guessing it was a process—mostly subconscious—that began with Volume 3 (Azkaban) and hit warp-speed in Volume 4 (Goblet of Fire). By the time we finish The Order of the Phoenix, with its extraordinary passages of fear and despair, the distinction between "children's literature" and plain old "literature" has ceased to exist. The latest Potter adventure could be The Catcher in the Rye, minus the dirty words and the drinking... or maybe just the dirty words: just what the hell is butterbeer, anyway?

5.) What's the best thing about Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix?

ANSWER: This one's a slam-dunk. A great fantasy novel can't exist without a great villain, and while You-Know-Who (sure we do: Lord Voldemort) is a little too far out in the supernatural ozone to qualify, the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts does just fine in this regard. The gently smiling Dolores Umbridge, with

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her girlish voice, toadlike face, and clutching, stubby fingers, is the greatest movie-believable villain to come along since Hannibal Lecter. One needn't be a child to remember The Really Scary Teacher, the one who terrified us so badly that we dreaded the walk to school in the morning, and we turn the pages partly in fervent hopes that she will get her comeuppance... but also in growing fear of what she will get up to next. For surely a teacher capable of banning Harry Potter from playing Quidditch is capable of anything.

6.) Last (but not least), how good are these books? How good are they, really?

ANSWER: One can only guess... assuming, that is, one doesn't have access to Dumbledore's wonderful Pensieve glass. My own feeling is that they are much better than the His Dark Materials trilogy, which are their only contemporary competitor. Will kids (and adults, as well) still be wild about Harry a hundred years from now, or two hundred? My best guess is that ~~they~~^{he} will indeed stand time's test, and wind up on a shelf where only the best are ~~preserved~~^{kept}; I think Harry will take his place with Alice, Huck, Frodo, and Dorothy, and this is one series not just for the decade, but for the ages.

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