

Missing Harry

by [Catherine M. Wallace](#) in the [December 19, 2001](#) issue

Many parents have little choice about whether or not to see--or at least buy tickets for--the movie version of J. K. Rowling's novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. I went to see it with another audience in mind. If you have not read the novel but are mildly curious about all the attention Harry Potter is getting, should you see the movie instead? No. Despite some good performances and the usual array of engaging special effects, the movie seemed to me remarkably flat. In the time it takes to see the film, plus travel time, parking and so forth, most adults could probably read most of the book. For sheer entertainment value, that would be time better spent.

Turning a novel into a movie is difficult work at best: movie characters are almost always less engaging than their literary originals. My complaint goes a step further. The film leaves out major scenes depicting the characters' definition, development and relationships, transparently favoring action-packed or highly visual episodes. As a result, the narrative lurches from one "great scene" to another with remarkably little thematic continuity or cumulative dramatic tension. That decision in turn obscures the parallels that animate the plot and drive it forward with engaging energy: As the bully Draco Malfoy and his henchmen make life miserable for their classmates at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, so the consummately evil Lord Voldemort threatens the social order generally. Draco comes across as nothing more than an obnoxious creep, a pathetic jerk whom Harry shrugs off with considerable panache. Lord Voldemort is merely a celluloid bad guy--perhaps because Hollywood has forgotten how to describe a bone-chilling menace except through explicit blood-and-guts violence that would be inappropriate in a movie intended for children.

I also object, as other viewers have, to the film's handling of the heroine, Hermione Granger. She is portrayed as far more overbearing than she is in the novel, without any of the beguiling insecurity of the consummate outsider who relies on brains, hard work and generosity to win her way. The film seems guilty of the classic antipathy to smart, capable women--exaggerating her clumsy self-confidence and

willingness to help others into an insufferable arrogance, and then suppressing her skillful contribution in solving one of the puzzles guarding the sorcerer's stone. Because she is the only character whose growth or change makes it into the movie, the antifeminist hostility of the interpretation seems all the more intentional.

A good movie has to be more than an assortment of exciting moments from a novel. Adults are apt to be bored by this film, and adults who have read the novel are likely to be annoyed as well. I suspect that most young viewers will be no less critical. If the director had taken youngsters as seriously as Rowling does, we might have had less of chocolate frogs jumping out of windows and more of engaging kids laying sturdy claim to their own emergent identities despite the timeless array of adolescent hazards: mean teachers, bullying classmates, too much homework, personal insecurities and clueless authorities.