

*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*

Rated PG-13

Runtime: 2 hrs, 13 min.

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*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find them* is a 2016 fantasy film directed by David Yates (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, *Legend of Tarzan*) and written for the screen by Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, in her screenwriting debut. It's a spin-off of the Harry Potter film series and stars Oscar-winner Eddie Redmayne (*Theory of Everything*,) as British wizard Newt Scamander, fresh off the boat to New York City in 1926, following a year in the field as a sort of magical zoologist. At the start of the film, Scamander smuggles his peculiar cargo, a bigger-on-the-inside suitcase housing a menagerie of wild magical creatures, past an Ellis Island Customs Officer. Before long, Newt stumbles into a conflict between the American magical community and the unsuspecting non-wizard populace of the city.

Large chunks of screen-time are devoted to other major characters like Katherine Waterston's (*Inherent Vice*) Tina Goldstein, a demoted Auror (a kind of Wizard Cop) attempting to bring Newt into the authorities for "violating the magical statute of secrecy." Newt's crime is allowing non-wizard Jacob to unintentionally release some of Newt's rambunctious creatures into the streets of New York. This could prove disastrous for the magical community of America, headed by its iron-fisted president Seraphina Picquery (Carmen Ejogo,) who enlists the services of her right-hand man Percival Graves, played with cool menace by Colin Farrell (*Saving Mr. Banks*) to track down the troublemakers before the "Second-Salemers," a cult of politically indoctrinated anti-witch children led by abusive foster mother Mary-Lou Barebone (Samantha Morton,) expose the magical community to the non-wizard world. Meanwhile, Government-agent Graves may have his own nefarious agenda.

That's a lot of plot, mythology, and characters to fit into a film which runs just two hours, and I haven't even mentioned the Obscurus, a semi-invisible smoke monster with a nasty habit of ripping through buildings and killing senators at inconvenient moments. For the most part, it all comes together by the final act but only if you pay close attention to Rowling's dense, busy script. One gets the sense that Rowling, the brilliant mind behind the Harry Potter books, struggled a bit when adapting her writing skills for the big screen. Her script is jam-packed with people, places and plot, and everything feels underdeveloped.

On the positive side, the performances are strong from top to bottom. Redmayne, as Newt, brings a meek and introverted energy to the role; he's a unique protagonist in an era of brash, wise-cracking heroes like Tony Stark. Waterston plays Tina as a cop with a heart of gold who eventually takes a liking to the mayhem causing Newt. *Fine Frenzy* musical artist and *Transparent* star Alison Sudol is delightful as Tina's red-haired flapper-esque sister Queenie, who falls for Jacob, played by the charming comedic actor Dan Fogler (*Fanboys*.)

The film, shot by acclaimed cinematographer Philippe Rousselot (*A River Runs Through It*,) has an oppressively bleak look for most of its runtime. Director David Yates' visual style renders the roaring 20's into a washed-out gloom of muddy greys, browns and blacks. The sets, designed by Potter alum Stuart Craig, as well as the costumes by Oscar-winning Colleen Atwood, work hard to make the film visually appealing, but it nearly proves a losing battle.

The bigger problem is one of pacing. Yates, along with his long-time editing partner Mark Day, fail to weave together the scenes in a cohesive way. *Fantastic Beasts* starts with a flurry of rushed character introductions, a busy jumble of scenes that start too late and end too early, and this continues for nearly half the runtime. As a result, even with all this plot, Beasts never gathers enough momentum and individual scenes lack breathing room. The set-ups and character arcs, rising action and climax all feel like a checklist of events rather than a well-told story with highs and lows. Some of the humor falls flat as well; the timing is always just a little bit off. Early scenes which should be charming are missing the necessary heart and magic.

There's an issue of visual and tonal consistency as well. The washed-out greys of the color palette take a backseat for two extended scenes in which we enter Newt's magical suitcase and are treated to the candy-colored spectacle of his traveling zoo. Like much of the film's world-building, everything moves far too quickly, and there's not enough time to enjoy the less-than convincing C.G.I. scenery. The score, composed by James Newton Howard (*The Hunger Games*,) dips too far into syrupy sweet territory during these suitcase excursions. You can feel a strained attempt to create whimsy and wonder where there isn't any. Howard conjures some nice melodies here and there throughout the piece, but at times his score is a little too reminiscent of Danny Elfman and elsewhere tends to sound generic. The suitcase scenes belong in a different movie entirely than the pitch-dark sequences following the Second-Salemers, led by fanatical and twisted Matriarch Mary Lou Barebone; these passages feature dead-eyed, haunted children and off-screen abuse, inflicted by a belt. This subplot, which gradually takes center stage as the film goes on, feels more like a horror film than a light-hearted fantasy adventure.

There are fun moments, such as when Newt and Jacob, eventually joined by Tina and Queenie, must track down and round up Newt's various bizarre creatures. Another highlight is a sequence

late in the film in which our heroes descend into an underground speakeasy where the main delicacy is a drink called giggle-water and the shady establishment is ruled over by a bootlegging goblin named Gnarlack, played by Ron Perlman (*Hellboy*.) Like every scene, it's over too quickly, and the film could have used more world-building like this; the 1920s is a fascinating setting for an urban fantasy, but this movie feels like a missed opportunity. Other than the speakeasy and a quick detour to the underwhelming American Magical Congress earlier in the film, we don't visit many unique locations. Add to that Yates's tendency to set every scene either at night or during an overcast day, and the film just isn't as colorful or visually rich as it should be.

Ultimately, *Fantastic Beasts* is fun enough in fits and starts. It's an interesting novelty to see Rowling pen a story about her Wizarding World that doesn't star Harry Potter. There are enough likable characters and cool story beats to recommend it, but the film is too often let down by apathetic direction, poor pacing, and an inconsistent tone.

6/10 stars.

This film is available on DVD in the Marshall District Library collection as well as on DVD or Blu-Ray through MeLCat. Please contact the Help Desk for more information: 269.781.7821 x10.