

The creatures of 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them' steal the show

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««« out of 4

Running Time: 133 min.

Five years was all it took. The Harry Potter franchise was one of the biggest in cinematic history, breaking box office records and drawing in huge audiences worldwide. So, it isn't that much of a surprise that some sort of follow-up was eventually fast-tracked, despite after everything having been wrapped up.

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them is that new addition. It's a prequel of sorts, set in the same universe as the previous series but featuring all new characters and a different focus.

The story begins in Manhattan during the late 1920s, with the arrival of Newt Scamander (Eddie Redmayne). He's a Ministry of Magic employee writing an encyclopedia of sorts about the various creatures within the wizarding world.

Unfortunately, some of the creatures from his international collection get loose in the city, drawing the ire of the local Magic Congress. Specifically, members Porpentina Goldstein (Katherine Waterston) and her boss, Percival Graves (Colin Farrell).

Newt and the escaped creatures are blamed for a death and destruction in the city, forcing the hero to hurriedly collect them all up and prove their innocence. Helping the protagonist is a

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baker without magic abilities named Jacob Kowalski (Dan Fogler), along with Porpentina and her sister, Queenie (Alison Sudol).

It doesn't all work, but I'd say enough of it entertains to earn a recommendation. Director David Yates, who was behind the camera on the last four *Harry Potter* films, returns to helm this tale.

His presence helps to tie together the new film visually with the old ones and keeps some sense of familiarity to the proceedings, along with some familiar references to the past (or future, in this case).

The impressive cast helps tremendously. Redmayne doesn't get too big or exaggerated in his portrayal of the introverted Newt. His deep care for the magical species subtly and sweetly makes a plea for animal welfare.

Farrell and an anti-magic protester named Mary Lou (Samantha Morton) are suitably menacing when they're onscreen. But what works exceedingly well are a couple of the supporting turns.

The Kowalski character makes a great partner for Newt and entry point for the audience. Fogler is extremely likable and entertaining in the role, keeping his character affable while making the most out of his shock at the strangeness occurring all around.

Of course, the creatures themselves are a treat. Specifically, one that bears a strong resemblance to a platypus and is compelled to steal anything shiny. The furry little animated character pretty much steals the entire movie, creating havoc wherever it runs loose. Based on the audience reaction, this cute little individual could probably have fronted its own successful spin-off series.

As mentioned, the movie isn't without a few problems. Early on, the stakes don't seem all that high and there isn't a big, imminent threat.

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There is a fair amount of set-up in establishing the US branch of magic and some outside pockets of intolerance towards wizardry. One does get the feeling that characters and organizations are being developed for future installments, but it slows the pacing down at times.

And while the look of the film is impressive, I couldn't help but focus on one strange aspect in the background. During many scenes, the streets of Manhattan look very, very sparsely populated. It doesn't look like a bustling metropolis and it couldn't help but stand-out.

And finally, because the villains are put so far in the background until late in the feature, the climax ends up feeling a little underwhelming.

Still, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* is enjoyable overall and serves as a decent enough introduction to this new line of franchise features. As long as the villains are more prominently displayed in the future and the fuzzy and unique creatures are given just as much attention the next time out, audiences should be well entertained into the foreseeable future.

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