Written by Mike Schulz
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HARRY POTTER & THE SORCERER'S STONE

When I sheepishly tell friends that I haven't yet read any of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, their reaction is usually shock – "You're kidding!" – followed by euphoric insistence – "You've got to read them! You'll love them!" When I tell these same friends that I didn't much like the movie version of *Harry Potter & The Sorcerer's Stone*, I get a different response, one that's a combination of mild disgust and serious condescension.

"Of course you didn't," their rolling eyes say. "You didn't read the book." (It's the same snotty attitude *I* employ whenever people tell me they "didn't get" *Memento* or *Moulin Rouge*.) They make it perfectly clear that
Harry Potter
, the movie, was made solely for them ("them" being the millions of the world's voracious Potter-heads); others need not attend. And they might have a point; if Kevin Smith can make
Jay & Silent Bob Strike Back
, which must be completely incoherent to anyone unfamiliar with Smith's oeuvre, there's nothing inherently wrong with the
Harry Potter
flick rewarding the faithful by giving them the by-the-numbers film version they've dreamed of.
Harry Potter & The Sorcerer's Stone
is a big, handsome production, filled with classy art direction and classier performers. It's also a

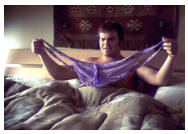
bit of a dud, because all the professionalism in the world can't compensate for what's missing: magic.

The trouble started, I think, when they turned the project over to Chris Columbus, who has some huge hits on his résumé (*Home Alone*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Stepmom*) but not a good movie in the bunch. Chris Columbus might be the *least* magical of directors. His staging is generally uninspired – there are a lot of static two-shots in his works – and he has no sense of subtlety; every plot point, every character trait, is thrust at us with such obviousness that only an utter dimwit could fail to comprehend what's going on. Initially, this obviousness extends to his direction of the actors: At the start of *Harry Pottter*, Columbus presents us with Harry's loathsome aunt and uncle (Fiona Shaw and Richard Griffiths), and they're so grotesquely overdirected as yowling monsters that you might want to weep; I didn't want Harry to escape their clutches so much as I wanted Shaw and Griffiths to escape *Columbus*.

Though the film starts off on a bum note, there's reason for hope once Harry sets off for Hogwarts School to fulfill his destiny of becoming a great wizard – time for a good dose of that magic we've been waiting for. But while Columbus pulls off a couple of neat effects early on – the living pictures adorning the school's hallways are special effects at their loveliest – it quickly becomes clear that nothing in the film is going to have the snap you want, because the filmmakers are operating out of fear. Intimidated, no doubt, by the prospect of pissing off the book's many fans, Columbus and company present us with one set piece after another – the flying-broomstick mishap, the Quidditch game, the life-sized chess match – and each one is completely devoid of tension and excitement and awe; they're offered to us dutifully, unimaginatively. Even if you haven't read Rowling's novels, it's apparent that this first *Harry Potter* film is a Greatest Hits package of the novel's best-remembered moments, and since they're all presented with the same drab competence – the film's CGI effects are adequate, but typical – you become more and more aware that *Sorcerer's Stone* doesn't really have much of a plot (and at two and a half hours, it's a *long* plotless movie). It's most obviously a setup for further, later adventures, but since that's the case, then why, as even my Potter-loving friends suggested, didn't the filmmakers find a way to combine books One and Two into a single feature? (Answer: That'd mean less profit for Warner Bros.)

It would be nice to report that the film's performers shine, but perhaps surprisingly, they make very little impression. Though Daniel Radcliffe makes a sweet Harry and has a great, joyous smile, Harry himself is a rather wan presence in this first installment, and the youngsters playing his classmates Hermione (Emma Watson) and Ron (Rupert Grint), though agreeable, are too practiced in their roles; none of them has the giddy spontaneity of real kids. The grownups don't fare much better. Of the film's enormous cast, only Robbie Coltrane (Hagrid) and John Hurt (an elderly magic-wand dealer) truly entertain; Richard Harris (Dumbledore), Maggie Smith (Professor McGonagall), and Alan Rickman (Professor Snape), in particular, have played variants of these roles so many times that J.K. Rowling probably had them in mind when she started work on her first Potter novel.

Will any of this matter to the Harry Potter fans flocking to the film? Probably not. They'll enjoy the film's fine production design and be thrilled that nothing has been done to tamper with their fond memories of the book, and they'll probably be able to overlook the movie's lack of enchantment by supplying their own, remembering the joy they felt in reading the novel and projecting that joy onscreen. But for the uninitiated, *Harry Potter & The Sorcerer's Stone* can be a dawdling, lumbering affair, a movie about magic that has almost none of its own.



SHALLOW HAL

Jack Black is so perfectly cast as the loutish titular character in *Shallow Hal* that it breaks your heart a little when you realize he's meant to be
adorable
. This whirligig of frenzied abandon should
never
be asked to play adorable; movies need all the uncouth, overcaffeinated, utterly confident performers they can get. In this latest comedy from Peter and Bobby Farrelly, Black's amazingly superficial Hal is hypnotized into seeing only the inner beauty of women, so when he meets and falls for the sweet, funny, but incredibly obese Rosemary, he sees Gwyneth Paltrow. You can see the film's fat jokes coming a mile away (and, thanks to the trailers, you've already seen just about all of them), and the Farrellys exhibit their usual drabnesss behind the camera; without the "benefit" of semen and excrement gags in this PG-13 flick, they're pretty listless filmmakers. Yet

Shallow Hal
is fairly easy to sit through. Paltrow gives a comic performance that's relaxed and deeply felt – it's her best work since
Shakespeare in Love
– and the plot shows some invention when it's revealed that Hal can see inner beauty in men, too, as well as inner
ugliness
in superficial women. It's a harmless, kinda sweet flick. Its sweetness, though, has an anesthetizing effect – you smile at the movie but you don't laugh at it – and Black, good though he is, seems hampered by having to play The Jerk Who Turns Nice, and can't call on his full range of comic inspiration. Who needs a Mellow Jack?