

Analyzing Reviews

A.O. Scott (New York Times) Reviews Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

The tone this review provides readers with a new understanding of their own experiences with the films. Scott identifies what the viewer may feel at the end of the series but has not yet named, nostalgia, the bittersweet sense of the passing of time. His reader may say, “Ah, he is right. That is exactly how I feel. He has put his finger on it.” At the first of the review, he communicates this sense of nostalgia through his tone. At the end of the review, he writes about it directly.

Time for Young Wizards to Put Away Childish Things

by A. O. SCOTT (New York Times)

The midnight bookstore parties are all in the past, and, with the opening of the first half of the film adaptation of “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,” an extraordinary pop-culture cycle is on the verge of completion.

“Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone” was published in America in 1998 — a lifetime ago for many young readers, just yesterday for their parents — and that tale and its six sequels now seem like permanent fixtures of the literary landscape. Under the spell of J. K. Rowling’s prose, a great many middle-aged readers were temporarily changed into 10-year-olds. That none of the movies have demonstrated quite the same power makes it easy to underestimate their success. But in the past decade more than a few promising franchises based on popular book series have failed to turn loyal readers into enthusiastic audiences or to bring in legions of new fans. Their fate (think of “Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events” and “The Golden Compass”) suggests that the perennial appeal of “Harry Potter” on screen was hardly a foregone conclusion.

So by now it is beyond doubt that “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1” will attract the passionate, the curious and the nostalgic in large numbers. And they are likely to be pleased.

Analysis

The headline sets the tone of nostalgia: Time for Young Wizards to Put Away Childish Things

The headline is perfectly accurate. The movie is about the main characters’ first year away from their school, and their adult battles when they no longer worry about such childish things as quidditch, exams and social pressure. But the literary allusion, the set of ideas to which “Put Away Childish Things” refers [possible marginal definition of allusion?], evokes a widely-known biblical passage from the King James Bible. Paul, an early Christian leader, writes to fellow Christians at Corinth, Greece, “When I was a child, I spake [spoke] as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” This passage with its measured triplets carries with it a sense of the passing of time and the necessary but regretful end of childhood, an excellent allusion that fits both Harry Potter’s grim adventures and the feeling devoted fans may feel as the story nears its end and they are ushered out of the fantasy world where they have so many hours.

His opening sentence also is shaped by nostalgia. He writes of things “all in the past,” and “on the verge of completion.” His next graf recounts the publishing of the books in America 13 years before his review is written, “a lifetime ago for many young reads, just yesterday for their parents.” He notes that “a great many middle-aged readers were temporarily changed into 10-year-olds.”

In three sentences he notes the success of the books’ transition to movies and then identifies the movie’s audience, “the passionate, the curious and the nostalgic.” His simple, seven-word sentence sums up his position on the movie. “And they are likely to be pleased.”

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His closing, the usual place to restate an opinion, is a close mirror of his opening. The movie is a “reasonably satisfying experience in its own right.” But he reserves his closing sentence for the new understanding he has just given his readers, first through his tone and now explicitly. “The sorrow you experience may well be a premonition of the imminent end of a long and, for the most part, delightful relationship.”

Hedy Weiss (Chicago Sun-Times) Reviews Broadway Production of Spider Man

Flaws in Broadway’s ‘Spider-Man’ will make you crawl the walls

Hedy Weiss, Theater Critic
(Chicago Sun-Times)

I did not see the “original” version of “Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark,” the new Broadway musical and cultural dartboard many critics attended (and trashed) this past March after multiple cancellations of official openings left them frustrated. But I found something innately decadent and off-putting about both the serious stage accidents that triggered a ghoulish frenzy during previews, and the show’s \$70 million budget.

But now the “new and improved” version of the show will open Tuesday at the Foxwoods Theatre in Times Square. And a visit to the musical this weekend left me with one question: If this is what the final edition of “Spider-Man” looks like — after months of reworking overseen by “show doctors,” and a three-week suspension of performances to institute changes — just how stupefyingly bad must the first edition have been?

Hedy Weiss’s tone communicates acid disapproval long before she states her opinion.

The headline is search-engine friendly with the words “Broadway’s” and “Spider-Man.”

But “will make you crawl the walls” is not written for a search engine, rather for a human reader. It is both a pun on Spidey’s wall-crawling abilities (something that is lost on search engines) and a strongly negative statement aimed at the reader’s sensory experience. If you have not used the phrase yourself, you certainly understand the feeling. You may have “wanted to crawl the walls” during a boring class just before lunch or in an uncomfortable situation where you have had to sit politely while desperately wanting to be somewhere else.

The reviewer’s two, long and complicated opening sentences ooze her haughty disdain. The first one is 37 words long, the second 27. On one level this paragraph simply says she did not see the early version of show that had frustrated other critics with delayed openings, but that she had thought it cost too much in human suffering and in money. However her use of quotation marks around *original*, her parenthetical “(and trashed)” followed closely by “ghoulish frenzy” and “innately decadent” suggest that she will have nothing positive to say about the show.

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Her second graf begins with a “what, when and where” sentence that is relatively neutral. It is decorated with only one set of quotation marks around new and improved, marks that suggest she is quoting someone else, and she does not believe it is “improved.” The next sentence is a rhetorical question, whopping 51-words long. It ends by asking, “just how stupefyingly bad must the first edition have been?”

She creates this last 51-word sentence with the help of a rhetorical device called *accumulatio*, which means to heap up or amass. She piles on three more reasons the show should have been good, in addition to the ones she mentioned in her first graf, “the ghoulish frenzy” and the \$70 million budget. The show has been reworked for months. “Show doctors” (again the quotation marks implying *so called* show doctors) came to resuscitate it. It was suspended for three weeks. She follows up on this heap or mass of reasons with a powerfully sarcastic rhetorical question, “Just how stupefyingly bad must the first edition have been?”

Long before the reader gets to the final, scathing ten words of that 51-word sentence, her sentence length, word choice, even her punctuation, has signaled that this is a negative review.