

*Harry Potter and the Cursed Child: Parts I & II*

A new play by Jack Thorne

Based on an original story by J.K. Rowling

*This review contains major spoilers for Harry Potter #1-7. Cursed Child spoilers are minor.*

Plays, barring a few exceptions, are meant to be seen.

So why do we still read Euripides and Sophocles, Aeschylus and Aristophanes? Shakespeare, Middleton, Marlowe, Webster? Ibsen and Shaw? Tom Stoppard, Tony Kushner, Peter Shaffer?

There's certainly a "take what you can get" factor: it's not always possible to see a play in person, and so we have to make due with the text itself. But there's also—or at least there should be—an inherent pleasure in the language. Drama requires dialogue to stretch and warp itself in ways that it wouldn't in a novel or short story, to create atmosphere and build character with less reliance on action and description (which are a part of theatre, certainly, but they rarely bear the brunt of communication with the audience). *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* fails on this front. The dialogue is stilted and conventional at best, featuring lines such as "Hi Scorpius. I mean, I'm Scorpius. You're Albus. I'm Scorpius" (15). Get it? He mixed up the names because that's what awkward people do, and how would we know he's awkward if he didn't do that? There's a scene in *Silver Linings Playbook* in which Bradley Cooper hurls a copy of *A Farewell to Arms* so hard at a window that it shatters the glass and lands on the lawn outside; *Cursed Child* will make you want to do the same. But after you board up the window and settle down with a nice cup of tea, you'll find yourself sneaking out into the dewy grass so you can grab your copy and pick up where you left off. For better or worse, *Harry Potter* will do that to you.

The dull and lifeless dialogue in *Cursed Child* only serves to highlight the rare moments when it strikes sparks. My favorite example comes from a new character, Delphi, when she is speaking to Albus Potter early in the play: "So is Harry your dad? That's a bit wow, isn't it?" (35) One can hardly help but think of the boy in Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," "smack[ing] his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant[ing], *They is, they is, they is.*" There's an unexpected poetry in Delphi's "bit wow" that left me smiling and delighted—and disappointed when *Cursed Child* never again tinkered so slyly with language. There are halfhearted attempts to return to "wow" as a sort of ongoing joke that the play seems to think is hip (it employs "geek" and "übergeek" to the same effect and fails miserably on all counts), but they're just that: halfhearted.

Let's back up and start at the beginning. What is this play even about? *Cursed Child* pivots around three major characters: Harry Potter (duh), Albus Potter (his middle child), and Scorpius

Malfoy (Draco's son). This is the first time in the core series that we've had multiple points-of-view featured throughout a singular story; formerly, we would only break from Harry's POV for one-off chapters such as the openings of *Half-Blood Prince* (the Muggle Prime Minister) or *Deathly Hallows* (Snape). (The first chapter of *Goblet of Fire* is technically in Harry's POV, but it seriously pushes the limits of third-person limited.) The transition to multiple POVs is a difficult one—I'd say the story is roughly split 50% Albus, 20% Scorpius, 30% Harry, but I couldn't tell until the climactic scene who this story actually "belonged" to. Who was the protagonist? Who had the core conflict? The ending makes it clear that the title is no lie: this is a *Harry Potter* story. The majority of the text, however, puts the narrative weight on Albus Potter. And to make the issue even more complicated, the most interesting character—the one with the most compelling story, the one with the most conflict—is unquestionably Scorpius. It certainly would have damaged sales, but relegating Harry and Albus to the background and retitling the play *Scorpius Malfoy and the Cursed Child* would have done wonders for the narrative.

When it comes to fundamentals, though, I am pleased to say that one of this play's best qualities is that it's, well...a play. I was struck by the singular intersections between the Potterverse and *Cursed Child*'s theatrical qualities. Polyjuice Potion, Transfiguration, and time travel provide ample opportunities for actors to play dual roles, and there's a certain charm in seeing the seams of the medium and picking up on those moments when a character conveniently walks offstage so that they can appear again moments later as another character in their body (or vice versa); they lack magic on the page, but I enjoyed imagining how they would play out on stage. There's an immediacy and a tangibility to dual roles in theatre that even film cannot capture (although the Seven Potters sequence in *Deathly Hallows: Part 1* was irresistible in its own right). I only wish these moments had been used to say something about the characters. The closest *Cursed Child* ever comes to doing so is when an actor playing one of the children appears during a time travel sequence as the younger version of their parent; it's an unexpected delight, but it only serves to remind us that the child is a carbon copy of a character who came before—which their dialogue and actions earlier in the play already made crystal clear. In a work so obsessed with genealogy, heredity, and the fear of being unable to escape the shadow of one's parents—or worse, *becoming* one's parents (sometimes literally)—it's a baffling missed opportunity. But wasted potential is hardly the most troubling issue with *Cursed Child*. What are the deeper problems?

"Show, don't tell." I can't believe I have to make such a basic criticism of the eighth canonical *Harry Potter* story, but *Cursed Child* has a serious problem with characters blatantly stating their feelings, motivations, or whatever recently-revealed nugget of trite wisdom they've learned lately. Draco Malfoy actually says "the power of friendship" in this play. More damning is one of the core relationships of the narrative: the friendship between Albus and Scorpius. The

reader/viewer is told perhaps a dozen times that they are best buddies, but the way they speak and act around one another didn't convince me for a second that this was the case (perhaps performers can bring their relationship to life on the stage, but they have next to nothing to work with). The best moment Albus and Scorpius have together is a scene with no dialogue: after a falling out, they are swept into each other's presence—and then pulled apart—by the moving staircases in Hogwarts. It's a crisp confluence, the mundanity of human emotion and the magic of the wizarding world coming together in a way that feels entirely natural and evocative.

Human emotion isn't the only mundane quality in *Cursed Child*, however. The magic itself, so full of wonder in the original seven *Potter* novels, is now rote and unremarkable. It's the equivalent to, say, pulling up a map on an iPhone for us—mind-blowing when you really think about it, but so common to us that we *don't* think about it. This is one of the smartest moves that *Cursed Child* makes: these characters, after all, have been practicing magic for decades, and we've been reading the books for nearly as long. Of course magic is no longer magical. Stage productions will require some inventive flair (this show is clearly written for a budget that would put *Angels in America* to shame; apologies to high school theatres), but readers will be as numb to the flashes and bangs and flying objects as the characters themselves—and strangely enough, that's a breath of fresh air in the Potterverse. It shifts the narrative weight to unexpected places, and that's exactly what *Cursed Child* needs. Albus and Scorpius are in the spotlight here.

But even though their relationship occasionally shines, they also serve to highlight *Cursed Child's* ignorance of its own tone and subtext. The play does not seem to pick up on the fact—or deliberately ignores, an even greater sin—that their chemistry leans more romantic than platonic; it's a conspicuous implication that all but the most inattentive readers/viewers will pick up on. I certainly don't need Albus and Scorpius to be queer for the sake of being queer (although two gay protagonists in the Potterverse is long overdue and would be exceedingly lovely), but it is entirely frustrating when a quality that is so strongly suggested in the text isn't even acknowledged—let alone paid off in a meaningful way. It's 2016, and there's no excuse for *Potter's* blindness to diversity anymore, but that's not the core problem here. Readers may be familiar with the concept of "Chekhov's gun," a guideline for writing good fiction which states that if you put a gun on the mantelpiece in act one, it has to go off in act three (pop culture has largely distorted Chekhov's gun into the reverse—that a gun which goes off in act three has to be placed on the mantelpiece in act one—but that's another matter entirely); the Albus/Scorpius relationship is a Chekhov's gun that never goes off. Violating this guideline is breaking an implicit promise to the reader, and *Cursed Child* does it more than once.

The other examples come from its thematic throughlines. *Cursed Child* sets up three core conflicts in its early scenes, one for each major character: Albus is terrified of being sorted into Slytherin, Scorpius is terrified of an insidious rumor that he is Voldemort's child, and Harry

himself is terrified of Voldemort actually coming back. These are all promising setups for a compelling story, but they are all either abandoned or allowed to fizzle out. There's a book by Howard Mittelmark and Sandra Newman called *How Not to Write a Novel*; broken promises are so abundant in *Cursed Child* that it legitimately could be passed out in creative writing classes as a companion piece called *How Not to Structure a Story*. The conflicts pivot on a central plot in which Albus and Scorpius attempt to return to the Triwizard Tournament that took place in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* in order to save Cedric Diggory, who was killed by Peter Pettigrew on behalf of Voldemort. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. *Cursed Child* obsessively invokes Voldemort's command to Peter verbatim: "Kill the spare." There's a deep distress around that word. *Spare*. Plenty of corpses littered the Potterverse by the end of *Deathly Hallows*—there's a passing reference in *Cursed Child* to the Battle of Hogwarts and the "Fallen Fifty," one of the play's sly bits of subtle worldbuilding—but only one was a spare: Cedric.

Deaths were wounds in *Potter*, but most of them healed. Sirius. Dumbledore. Hedwig. Moody. Dobby. Fred. Lupin. Tonks. Snape. They all gave their lives in the fight for a better world. Cedric is the one wound that didn't heal, because he wasn't part of the war and didn't even know that it was coming. "Innocent" isn't even the right word; it's "spare." It's not the characters so much as the Potterverse itself that seems to be at unrest over this single word and everything it means. That's why I was so engaged when Albus and Scorpius set off on their mission to save Cedric. The stakes were singular. They were specific. They *meant* something. Which makes it all the more disappointing when the narrative devolves into yet another save-the-world story. (Remember the end of the first Sam Raimi *Spider-Man* movie, when Peter Parker had to choose between saving Mary Jane and a dozen children in a falling cablecar? Remember how concrete that felt? Now compare it to virtually any superhero movie post-*Avengers*, where the climax involves hordes of aliens/robots/whatever threatening to kill/enslave everyone on the planet/in the universe. You get my point.) To its credit, *Cursed Child* successfully resolves the tension between Cedric's death and that word "spare," but in an entirely unexpected way that shifts the karmic weight of the Potterverse. The tonal reorientation turns this entire world upside down.

Over the last few years, I've been thinking more and more about where fictional universes fall on a spectrum of karmic justice—in other words, how chance and coincidence relate and respond to characters of various moral standings. TV shows such as *Breaking Bad* and *Fargo* take place in karmically just universes: villains are allowed to be villains, but bad luck and misfortune always ensure that they are appropriately punished. The fictional universe stabilizes itself in the direction of karmic justice. *A Song of Ice and Fire* takes place in a karmically neutral universe: there is little to no discernible relation between luck, fortune, and the moral standings of the characters (in an interesting twist, its television adaptation, *Game of Thrones*, has morphed over the course of its run from a karmically neutral universe to a karmically just universe).

The original seven *Potter* novels also take place in a karmically neutral universe. But *Cursed Child* does something that I'm not sure I've ever seen in a work of modern fiction: it takes place in a karmically unjust universe, where chance and coincidence actively favor and proliferate towards evil, determinism, and an ouroboros of progress that constantly cycles back and destroys itself. This is all facilitated and inescapable due to the sheer amount of *power* in the Potterverse. So long as there are devices that turn back time, so long as there are cloaks that hide one from sight, so long as there is a killing curse, the wizarding world will never be at peace and never be stable. The arc of the *Potter* canon has always been away from magic; recall the destruction of the Philosopher's Stone, the elimination of the time-turners, and the stowing away of the Elder Wand. *Cursed Child* makes it clearer than ever that magic has doomed this society to live in and repeat the past ad infinitum, and only in the absence of magic can it truly move forward. It's a beautiful contrast to Hagrid's famous entrance and even more famous words, the words that opened up a whole new world of wonder for so many readers: "Yer a wizard, Harry." *Cursed Child* doesn't undermine the magic of *Potter*—and I mean that here in the sense of literature and its magical qualities—but rather enhances it, reorients it, recontextualizes it, complicates it. It teaches us to think about and respond more critically to the wizarding world. Rowling's work is no less magical for that—it's just more interesting. *Cursed Child* deserves praise at least for this.

It's unfortunate that the rich thematic and philosophical work carried out by *Cursed Child* is built on such a shaky foundation. The most superficial (and most irritating) issue here is the play's poor presentation. It says "Special Rehearsal Edition Script" on the dust jacket, which might as well translate to "Special Unedited Edition Script"; scene descriptions are full of run-on sentences, dialogue is frequently—punctuated—with excessive em-dashes which—sometimes denote the beginning of an independent clause—sometimes not—you can't always tell the difference—which leads to a rather—syncopated—reading experience—that sounds nothing like—the way a person would actually talk—the *Harry Potter* books have always had a problem with excessive em-dashes—but it's unforgivably bad here—I am utterly Stupefied—see what I did there—you see see what I did there. Wikipedia informs me that an "edited" edition of the script (called the "Definitive Collector's Edition") will be released next year, but that hardly excuses the edition *being sold for actual money* right now. I could have cleaned up the text of *Cursed Child* in the space of a day or two with altering any of the content; it's not as if this would be a particularly challenging or time-consuming task for a major book publisher. I'm also available to freelance. Take a hint here, Scholastic, I'm dropping anvils on your figurative head.

I'm never sure how to answer when people ask me if I liked *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. "I liked it" wouldn't be true. Nor would "I didn't like it." Even the answer I've been giving—"It's okay"—isn't entirely accurate: it implies a flatline reaction, failing to capture the wild highs and lows that ultimately average out to something in the middle. So did I "like" it?

Here's my answer.

It's the worst *Potter* story. No question. But it's also the most interesting. It has more thematic crunch and deeper philosophical implications than any of the novels. It has more to *say*—even if it doesn't know how to say it. It's a borderline-incomprehensible mess, an ambitious failure, an indignant firecracker of a narrative infatuated with the pop culture phenomenon and fandom that birthed it. And that it's a play rather than a novel is the horcrux that makes it indestructible: I'm not sure that the choice of medium was as necessary as Rowling would have you believe, but there's no better way to tell a story so relentlessly aware of its audience and its artificiality. “Bravery doesn't forgive stupidity,” one character advises another in the third act. Such words are likely true in the real world; fiction is, quite literally, another story. When it comes to the Hogwarts saga and this dramatic nine-years-later dénouement, bravery does forgive stupidity. The latest (last?) entry in the *Potter* canon is indeed a cursed child. But it's one worth raising.

Review by Aaron Larson