

## ***Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix ... or, did J.K. Rowling ever read Ayn Rand?***

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## **HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX ... OR, DID J.K. ROWLING EVER READ AYN RAND?**

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*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

138 minutes, UK/USA (2007),

Cert: 12A, 138 mins

Starring: Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, Imelda Staunton, Alan Rickman, Rupert Grint.

I admit it: I'm a fan. So far, I've read the first five books of the Harry Potter series. OK, so it's not the most ingenious writing ever, and the concepts are hardly novel, but something that's gotten kids reading adventure stories in such large numbers can't be all that bad.

But there's something more in these books. They bring kids back to a different time, in a land far, far away, where political correctness hadn't been invented, and the health and safety industry hadn't commenced destroying all semblance of risk, fun and excitement. Fighting, scheming and disobedience; a child having self-belief when all others take the easy option; the acknowledgement of good and evil; indeed, the mere existence of people of better and worse ability—all of these things are in serious danger of being subverted by the egalitarian, risk-free, moral-subjectivist agenda of the Nanny Statists.

But, more still, there was something quite different in the fifth instalment, whose movie-version has just been released. It didn't take me long to realise that there was something all too controversial and disobedient about it. It almost seemed objectivist.

Most of the movie is set in the school for

witches and wizards, Hogwarts. Ayn Rand herself, and, more recently, Edwin Locke and Leonard Peikoff, have railed against the debilitating effects of statist education. Replete with "unknowables" and the dissemination of falsehoods, Rand believed that modern education so destroyed the minds of children that they entered the real world pathetically ill-equipped to think for themselves.

The major conflict between Harry and Dolores Umbridge—his Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher; a Ministry of Magic drone who slowly takes over the school, Hogwarts—is about lies. Harry, an honest, decent boy, simply believes his senses—leading to his spreading of the news that evil Lord Voldemort is back—and is frustrated to the point of anger by the insistence that this is simply not true. The Ministry has turned rotten—not unlike the Senate in another sci-fi franchise, *Star Wars*. From the Minister of Magic himself, Cornelius Fudge, through his underlings at the Wizengamot, a corrosive impotence has spread. Morally, there is no-one to stand up to not merely Voldemort himself, but to the *idea* that his return is imminent. Ostrich-like, they hide from the truth.

But the impotence is not something contained solely within the Ministry; it is to be spread to the children's minds. Imelda Staunton, who plays Umbridge, is superb in the role. She is the embodiment of the state zealot, positively evangelic about the righteousness and infallibility of the Ministry. Substitute "Ministry" with "State," and the

plot flows as one continuous sounding about the dangers of state-control of education, criminal-justice, crime—indeed, everything in the lives of these witches and wizards. Whatever is believed to be best practice by the Ministry must be executed by agents like Umbridge, and the health of the Ministry is paramount.

Rowling's premise has always been the necessity for the students to learn to arm themselves against evil, and each year (i.e. each book) has brought a new teacher, so difficult and dangerous is the task in the face of the mounting threat of Voldemort and his minions. So, just when the children need to be taught how to succeed—whether in *Harry Potter*, or in Rand's writings about the real world—they are being laden with useless, contradictory and inhibiting "skills". In these less-is-more times of continuous assessment, learn-by-rote (very important to Umbridge) and pointless courses where inspirational and important ones once existed, the belief that filling children's heads with information has completely missed the point of truly worthwhile education.

Harry and his friend, Hermione, are stunned that the Defence Against the Dark Arts course has been—you guess it—dumbed down. They are not to be taught practical skills, just theory. When Harry states the obvious—that there is a lot of evil out there, and that theory will not protect them—Umbridge scoffs, replying that there's nothing to worry about. After Umbridge shouts at Harry, "I won't have talking in class!" following more questioning of her authority, Hermione responds, under her breath, "You won't have us *thinking*." Well, after all, from the point of view of the Ministry, isn't an obedient, passive, dependent group of young witches and

wizards far more manageable and pliable?

All readers will have encountered mind-numbing, infuriating bureaucracy, and will readily identify this behaviour in Umbridge. No matter how wretched, how condescending, how suffocating she acts towards the pupils, she maintains the veneer of the perfect teacher: smiling, quiet, succinct, agreeable, and gracious—in other words, patently dishonest. She is the impossible face we have all met at airport security, at our children's school, at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and so on. The connection? State bodies and their life-sapping bureaucracy.

When one sees for themselves the ways in which these agencies operate, what becomes obvious is that the interaction between state-agent and Ordinary Joe or Jane is to be as dehumanizing as possible. I was a school prefect in my senior year in high school, and the school principal would instruct us as to how to deal with younger, disruptive pupils. We were to act as if we were listening, and nod at appropriate times, but we were never to actually engage in discussion. Regardless of claims and protests from the pupil, we had only one response—predetermined before the naïve young soul opened their mouth. Likewise, I was reminded of this rotten relationship when I saw Umbridge deal with the pupils. What is worse is that we realise (and she eventually states this herself) that she hates the children with whom she spends so much time working. Reminded of any harangued, bitter, tired state employees you've met recently, who, above all else, cannot abide the public they "serve"? This is what pointless, obstructionist policies do to once-enthusiastic employees.

Umbridge's effect on the school atmosphere

is poisonous. A giant wall in the ancient building becomes a testament to her rules and regulations. She has the school caretaker, Argus Filch, nail decrees to the wall—the amount of which is so large that his ladder balances precariously, at a dangerous height, so as to fit them all. (A small point about imagery, but significant when one thinks of the ever-increasing mountain of Federal laws produced annually.) For every problem she perceives, there is no reasoning or debate, but laws—i.e. force and punishment.

Something I realised in my trips to Eastern Europe—where my morbid fascination with Communism and state-terror brought me to various museums covering the brutality of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century—was that the suffering that occurred was so much more than just monetary and social freedom. They were *emotionally* crushed: every last dream they had; every waking moment of privacy and peace—they were stolen by heartless bureaucrats and state thugs, all in the name of the state. So, too, we see this in Hogwarts. For instance, I find the constant drone of public announcements about health and safety in malls, train stations and airports—invariably telling us we are forbidden from innumerable activities—to be deeply unnerving. Likewise, the pupils at Hogwarts feel a constant stream of oh-so-terribly-polite messages from Umbridge raining down on them. One-by-one, their assumed freedoms and enjoyments are being eliminated.

The most heinous crime of all—thinking for themselves—leads the pupils to form their own class, hidden away in a secret chamber. Its purpose is for them to learn how to defend themselves against evil. Their society is called Dumbledore's Army—named after the school principal, Albus Dumbledore,

who is one of the few adults they can trust. The parallels with education in the real world are striking: the inability of the Ministry-run education system to prepare the pupils for the outside world; the realisation by the pupils that they themselves, led by Harry's magical expertise, will have to teach themselves. Again, substitute the self-teaching of the pupils with home schooling or private, supplementary tuition, and one would be forgiven for thinking Rowling knows just how bad state schools have become.

Suspicion and distrust are in the air at Hogwarts: the existence of the subversive Dumbledore's Army and their illicit training sessions are under threat of being discovered by the Ministry. With her use of the Truth Serum, Umbridge turns pupil against fellow pupil in her effort to discover these covert activities—the very divide-and-conquer policy that Stalin used to destroy perceived enemies within his ranks. After all, when the state is to be defended, the end justifies all means.

While the translation of the story from book to film is somewhat lacking—like the failure to develop the characters, as well as a loss of depth in the story—the general philosophy that Rowling seems to be conveying makes it well worth a trip to the movies or bookstore. I was certainly caught up in the continuous parallels between the story and my anti-statism tendencies. Whether or not the plot was compelling or the characters credible mattered little in comparison to the joy of following an underlying theme of ghastly disobedience.