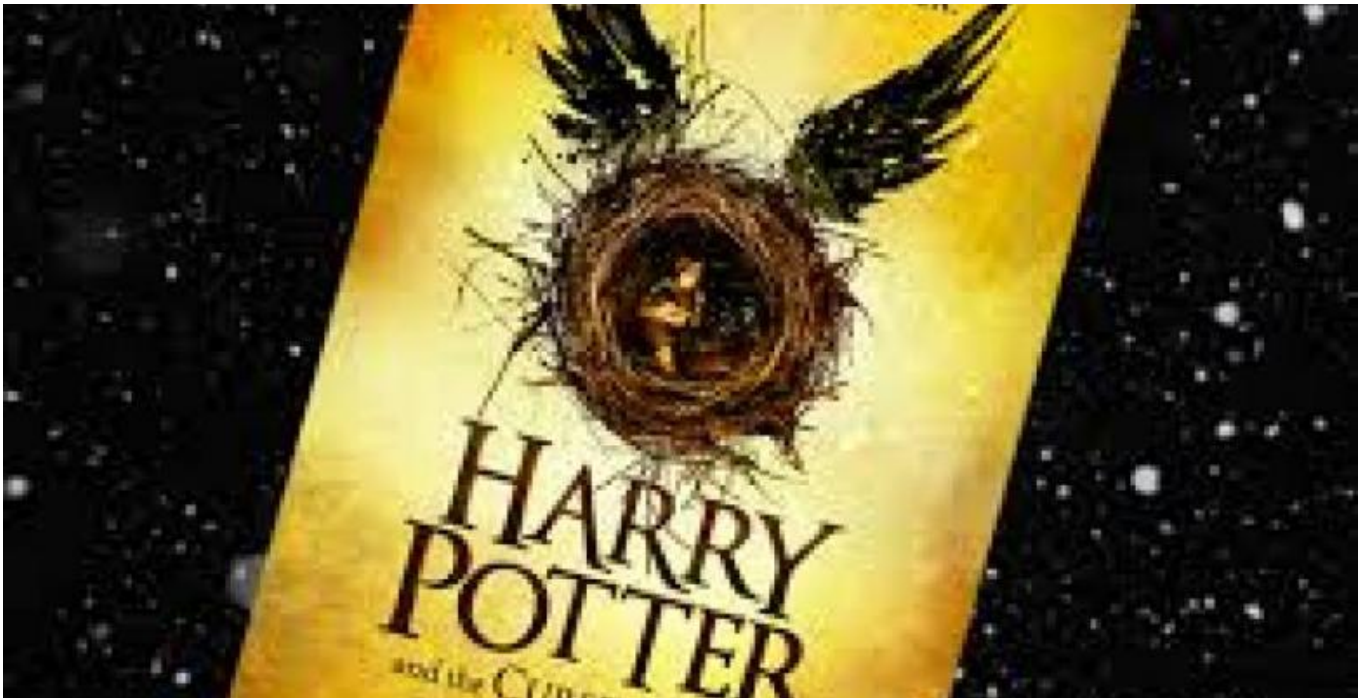


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When did pop culture forget how to let things end?

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In 2016 we've seen the return of a 20-year-old genre film and the playbook for a franchise that will never end. Superhero movies have evolved into a hedonic treadmill, and television shows with series finales throw an alley-oop to sequels, prequels, or spinoffs. Today, no one ever has to say goodbye to the characters they love — just see ya later.

But for me, nothing is more emblematic of this recent aversion to endings than the latest entry in the Harry Potter canon, the play and accompanying published script of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* that was released last weekend.

The original Harry Potter books told a meticulously constructed story that spanned the seven books and seven years of Harry's life. And then it ended. Evil was vanquished, the heroes lived Happily Ever After, and "All was well." The seven books (and the eight films they inspired) comprised a tale that Rowling had said was always planned out from the beginning to tell the story and end the way it did.

But deliberate beginnings and endings no longer suffice, and so in 2016 Harry Potter will be extended in both directions with a theatrical spinoff prequel, and the aforementioned London stage play sequel.

The play, which will be experienced by most fans for the time being as a printed script, is now the official "eighth story" of the Harry Potter tale, picking things up right where the 19 years later Epilogue of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows left off.

For those who haven't read the script or magically scored a West End ticket, consider this your spoiler warning.

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child is odd as a sequel in that it emphatically embraces some of the worst, least sensible parts of the Harry Potter canon (including the return of time travel, an idea that worked exactly once in Prisoner of Azkaban and then was wisely ignored as a gaping plot hole for the remainder of the series); features as a villain Voldemort's secret daughter that he conceived with Bellatrix Lestrange; and diverges into no less than two alternate timelines. (One timeline feels, as many time travel adventures do, like someone recapping from memory the plot of Back to the Future II.)

Don't get me wrong, the Cursed Child isn't botched from curtain rise to curtain fall. Ron has evolved into his obvious final form of a dad, complete with cheeky jokes and a doting relationship with his wife, Hermione. Draco's son, Scorpius Malfoy, despite being given the most evil sounding fictional name of all time, is a delightful nerd. And Hermione Granger is the Minister of Magic, because of course she is. Hermione has always been one of the series' best characters, and seeing her childhood intelligence bloom into adulthood excellence is one of the play's greatest pleasures.

It is admittedly possible my issues with the play itself are due to format. Rowling has said before, "I am confident that when audiences see the play they will agree that it was the only proper medium for the story," and my high school English teacher was quick to warn of judging Shakespeare when reading plays meant to be performed. Or perhaps it's me that's changed in the intervening nine years since the last book was published.

But it's hard not to shake the play's most vexing flaw: the implicit question of why it should exist is never answered. The story doesn't build upon Harry Potter, so much as it updates on its characters' status. Like a Christmas card from a distant cousin, it pours over many details without saying much.

When the Harry Potter story ended with Deathly Hallows, each arc was tied neatly with a bow. But in the nine years since, fans clamored for more Potter, and apparently no franchise with living fans can be left untouched in today's entertainment world.

And that's half the point of Cursed Child, and so many of these new franchise

entries. The problem isn't simply that we're getting more of something we love. The problem is that there's no conclusion, no definitive ending, because these new objects aren't designed to be complete. So Albus Potter, Scorpius Malfoy, and Rose Granger-Weasley will always have space for more adventures down the line. The Avengers and the Justice League must fight the even bigger threat lurking in a shadowy post-credit sequence. And we get movies like *The Force Awakens*, which ended in a literal hand-off to the upcoming Episode VIII.

Our stories aren't whole toys anymore insomuch as they're individual Lego bricks meant to snap into something bigger. They may construct something spectacular. They may make a mess. But on their own, they're just blocks in a model that we have no reason to believe will ever be complete. If all storytellers ever do is build and build upon one large model, setting up sequel after sequel, it diminishes the individual stories within, every victory or loss just a side stop at this particular junction because we've met the quota of film reel or pages until the next installment rolls around. There's no dramatic catharsis, just an ever escalating series of promises that something even better, even cooler, even more exciting is right around the corner.

And so, similar to the Star Wars prequels, fans are fed a new work that feels at the same time largely derivative of the things they loved, while missing the depth and originality of what made the original great in the first place. Harry's son Albus is a bundle of the worst, sulky parts of Harry himself. Delphini, Voldemort's daughter, feels like a defanged version of the erstwhile Dark Lord. And our hero, Harry Potter himself, is relegated to being rebuked about late paperwork at his desk job. While the prequels were clearly designed for a younger generation of Star Wars fans, I'm not sure who Cursed Child is for.

And sure, Harry's story is apparently finally over now, with this unneeded, extraneous appendix to his tale. But the franchise will live on, with the next installment in the form of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* coming to theaters this fall. And while the Rowling penned *Fantastic Beasts* series is currently planned as a trilogy, surely it can be expanded in all directions with a bit of studio magic.

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