

Dumbledore's Army

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue



It takes 10 or 15 minutes to catch up to the shorthand narrative style of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, the fifth film based on the J. K. Rowling novels (released at about the same time as the seventh and final book in the series). The screenwriter, Michael Goldenberg, and the director, David Yates, both new to the Potter movies, waste no time in setting up the story, and they don't pause to make sure that we remember everyone in the large cast of characters.

It's a smart approach. At 870 pages, *The Order of the Phoenix* is the longest book of the series, and though the plot is compelling, it's mostly an interior one, focused on Harry's turbulent psychological experience of adolescence. Eliminating much of Harry's troubled navel-gazing streamlines the story and allows Daniel Radcliffe to give his finest performance as Harry thus far.

Harry responds both to the escalating danger as the evil Lord Voldemort (Ralph Fiennes) gains a stronger foothold in the wizarding world and to the increasingly blinkered and shackled atmosphere at Hogwarts School, where a High Inquisitor newly appointed by the Ministry of Magic issues one ban after another and punishes students who insist that the Dark Lord has returned.

The Inquisitor is Dolores Umbridge (Imelda Staunton), who doubles as the new instructor in Defense Against the Dark Arts but refuses to teach Harry and his classmates anything they can actually use against the dark forces. She thinks that

the students are too young and that the charms are unsafe and aren't going to be needed.

Rowling must have had the time of her life creating Umbridge, who stands for every life-denying bureaucrat a child has ever come up against, a born fascist who hides her viciousness under a façade of middle-class British manners. Staunton gives a brilliant comic performance. Her eyebrows raised in exaggerated tolerance, her apple cheeks punctuating a perpetual air of knowingness and condescension, she draws attention to any perceived mistake or misconduct by emitting a high, tremulous noise that sounds like a hiccuping cat. When Harry insists that he has seen—and battled—Voldemort, she delivers a nanny's look of "What am I going to do with this child?" hopelessness. Then she devises painful ways of making him pay for making up stories. Umbridge is one of the great modern villains, and Staunton does her justice.

Since Umbridge refuses to teach them how to defend themselves, a small band of students, led by Harry's closest friends, Ron (Rupert Grint) and Hermione (Emma Watson), talk him into giving clandestine Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons. These secret warriors-in-training dub themselves Dumbledore's Army in honor of Hogwarts's benevolent headmaster. While Umbridge gives the movie a potent adversary, Dumbledore's Army imbues it with a fine spirit of just rebellion.

The Order of the Phoenix doesn't have the visual grandeur of the best of the Potter movies, Alfonso Cuarón's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. But Yates and his team whip up some genuine cinematic treats, like the thestrals, which draw the coaches that ferry the students to Hogwarts but can be glimpsed only by those who have seen death, and the sad-eyed giant Grawp (Tony Maudsley), half-brother of Hagrid (Robbie Coltrane), Hogwarts's clumsy, huge-hearted teacher of the Care of Magical Creatures. When Umbridge proctors her class's final exam, she stands before a huge pendulum, a marvelous child's anxiety-nightmare image.

Unlike the previous movie in the series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Phoenix* showcases the amazing supporting cast. It's in the nature of the stories that most of the characters stay in the background, coming forward only occasionally for one or another episode, but here you don't feel that Richard Griffiths and Fiona Shaw are wasted as Harry's Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, or Alan Rickman as Harry's most loathed teacher, sneering Severus Snape, or Maggie Smith and Emma Thompson as Professors McGonagall and Trelawney. David Thewlis reappears as the werewolf

Lupin, love and anguish both simmering in his melancholy eyes, and Gary Oldman is once more Byronic as Harry's beloved godfather, Sirius Black.

There's a new star in the ensemble: Helena Bonham Carter gives a mad little performance as Voldemort's most loyal servant, the venomous Bellatrix Lestrange. And among the Hogwarts students is another delightful newcomer: Evanna Lynch as the uncomplaining loner Luna Lovegood. Under Yates's supervision, the cast members are the true purveyors of magic.