

J. K. Rowling's wizards in the Jazz Age

***Fantastic Beasts* diagnoses how rising fear leads to demonizing others.**

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue



Eddie Redmayne in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Photo by Jaap Buitendijk. © 2016 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved.

The first in a series of five promised films that will add to J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter world, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* begins with a game of hide and seek that grows into an epic battle. Produced and written by Rowling, the film is set in New York City during the Jazz Age, between the great wars of the 20th century, and plays on themes familiar to Harry Potter fans: the fear of difference and the

repression of free expression.

When British magizoologist Newt Scamander arrives in New York with a battered suitcase chock-full of illegal magical creatures, he accidentally switches bags with a baker named Jacob Kowalski (Dan Fogler) and magical mayhem ensues. Newt, played by Eddie Redmayne, is an animal lover who wants to show his fellow wizards the beauty of creatures they disdain. He leads the hunt for his missing creatures with a charge “to recapture my creatures before they get hurt. They’re currently in alien terrain surrounded by millions of the most vicious creatures on the planet: humans.”

Newt and friends chase down a niffler, a cute creature with an affection for shiny things that leads it to crash into a jewelry store. There’s a giant rhinoceros-like animal that glows because it is in heat and goes crashing through the zoo, and a brightly colored, winged snake that expands and contracts. The creatures and their magical exploits represent the best of what computers can do with special effects—all the creatures are attractive in their own fantastic right.

But these are not effects for their own sake; they serve the plot and the characters. Rowling has shown that she can craft a beginning for a story that will lead to layers of depth and create relationships between the characters with plenty of room for development.

Fear is brewing in the city as something destructive and unexplainable wreaks havoc, and that fear is personified in Mary Lou Barebone (Samantha Morton), the leader of the New Salem Philanthropic Society. Her children’s names evoke Puritan virtues; daughter Modesty sings a playground chant about killing witches. While there’s nothing explicitly religious in the film, the imagery and the language suggest that these new witch hunters are kin to religious zealots. They are Puritans reduced to the puritanical.

Newt’s new friend Tina works for a magical government agency, the Magical Congress of the United States of America, which is anxious to keep the wizarding world secret. This concern for secrecy is the basis for draconian American laws against keeping magical creatures and against friendships between wizards and ordinary people. (The parallel with Prohibition, as with Puritanism, is just beneath the surface.) When Tina learns about Newt’s escaped creatures and his camaraderie with the nonmagical Kowalski, the stage is set for the game of magical hide-and-

seek to become something more.

Rowling has rightly diagnosed a world in which rising fear can lead to the demonization of others. But with its anti-Puritan subtext, Rowling is in danger of giving us a simple plea for tolerance with bad guys as repressive religious characters. In her Harry Potter books, Rowling managed to intertwine a cosmic battle between good and evil with everyday human relationships. We can hope that in the new series she'll honor the complexity of American religious history and not simply create a parody of it.

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