

Film Feature: Harry Potter and the Legacy of a Franchise

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on July 12, 2011 - 10:19am

- [Alan Rickman](#) [2]
- [Daniel Radcliffe](#) [3]
- [David Yates](#) [4]
- [Emma Watson](#) [5]
- [Film Feature](#) [6]
- [Harry Potter](#) [7]
- [Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2](#) [8]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [9]
- [J.K. Rowling](#) [10]
- [List](#) [11]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [12]
- [Rupert Grint](#) [13]

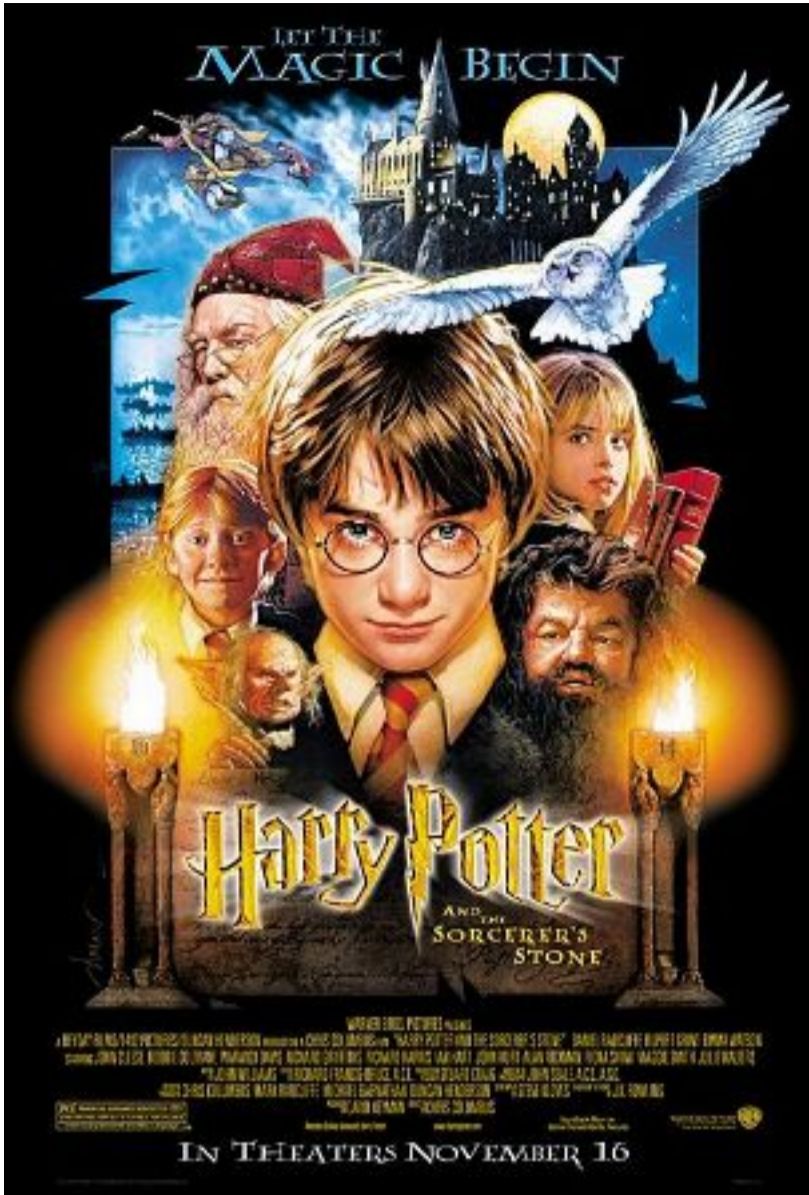
CHICAGO – For readers and moviegoers who have come of age with boy wizard Harry Potter, it’s impossible to look back on J.K. Rowling’s immortal series and not be engulfed in a bottomless Pensieve of memories. I wasn’t much of a fantasy buff when I began reading the books. My sister was a fervent fan, and she guaranteed that I would be hooked after the first few chapters. It ended up only taking a few pages for me to become completely enthralled by Rowling’s fusion of timeless Jungian archetypes, mythological creatures and marvelously inventive wit reminiscent of Roald Dahl.

The bare-bones premise of Rowling’s 1997 debut novel, “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone,” (changed to “Sorcerer’s Stone” for its 1998 U.S. release) was nearly identical to Dahl’s 1988 classic, “Matilda,” about a lonely child who utilizes her secret magical powers to defy her wicked parents and oafish brother. Like Matilda, Harry finds friendship, foes and ultimately self-actualization at school, though Rowling’s first major twist to the formula was her decision to make the school a magical one. It quickly became a tradition for me to read one “Potter” chapter a night, allowing the endless adventures and mysteries concealed within Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to seep into my subconscious. Since I read each of Rowling’s books only once, watching the subsequent film adaptations has been a glorious journey of rediscovery.

Like most fans, I was weary of any Hollywood studio attempting to cash in on the “Potter” phenomenon, yet Rowling’s close collaboration with the filmmakers was crucial to the success of these cinematic incarnations, which avoid all the pitfalls of soulless franchises. In fact, this may be the greatest film franchise of all time, in part because it functions not as a series of rebooted retreads but as a singular work of cohesive detail and cumulative power. It’s frankly astonishing to behold how the “Potter” pictures have maintained their exquisite quality, impeccable ensembles, narrative momentum and artistic integrity over the last decade. Warner Brothers couldn’t possibly have suspected it was launching a series that would go on to gross over \$2 billion. Pint-sized stars Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint and Emma Watson couldn’t have guessed how their identities would become irrevocably attached to their respective roles as Harry, Ron and Hermione. And producer David Heyman couldn’t have predicted that his incomparable cast and crew of veteran British talent would be sustained over eight consecutive pictures.

With the final installment, “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows: Part 2,” scheduled to open July 15th, I’ve decided to revisit and rank the previous seven films to illustrate just how much they have evolved and endured over time. Cue the Sorting Hat...

7.) Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone (2001)



Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

A good start to a great saga that built the foundation for a lasting franchise. Family-friendly director Chris Columbus (“Mrs. Doubtfire”) was an ideal choice for the early pictures, with his childlike love of slapstick and whimsy.

If the picture is clunky in spots, it’s primarily because the precocious and inexperienced leads are still easing into the cloaks of their heroic trio. Radcliffe is a complete blank slate, sporting the right look but none of the acting chops. Grint is adorably smush-faced and provides many of the best reaction shots, but the effortlessly natural Watson is the only young cast member who truly was a pro right off the bat.

Yet these kids couldn’t have asked for better acting mentors. As malevolent professor Severus Snape, Alan Rickman steals the show with his mesmerizing verbal patterns, while Robbie Coltrane exudes the burly warmth of a rugged teddy bear as gamekeeper Hagrid. He has a knack for absentmindedly dropping clues into casual chit-chat, enabling Harry and his loyal friends to solve the first of many mind-bending puzzles at their mystical boarding school.

The special effects are generally of the cartoonish variety, but Stuart Craig’s production design gives Hogwarts the look and feel of a tangible world as opposed to an expensive set. Along with Craig, screenwriter Steve Kloves (“Wonder Boys”) is surely the most unsung hero of the franchise. Given the unenviable task of condensing Rowling’s sprawling text into a feature-length running time, Kloves has done a spectacular job of pacing the action without settling into the encyclopedic rhythms of a Sparknotes-like synopsis. Of course, what truly makes the material come to life is the unforgettable score by John Williams, which still has the power to produce instant goosebumps.

Pensieve Moment: My sister and I made a habit out of attending every “Potter” film together. After “Sorcerer’s Stone,” we left the theater so energized that we decided to create our own scene-for-scene remake. She handled the camera and I played all the characters. Since neither of us had any editing software, we shot each scene in a linear order, thus requiring me to change costumes after practically every line. Needless to say, we didn’t make it past Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

6.) Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005)



Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Romantic subplots have always been this series' weakest element, yet they've never been quite as cringe-inducing as they are in this action-packed yet wildly uneven fourth installment. Mike Newell ("Four Weddings and a Funeral") brought a dryly British sensibility to the characters that continued under the direction of David Yates, but his approach to adolescent soap opera proves to only be sporadically successful.

As Hogwarts competes with two other supernatural schools in the Triwizard Tournament, they enact various traditions, including the Yule Ball, which is sternly defined by Professor McGonagall (played by the ageless Maggie Smith) as an evening of "well-mannered frivolity." Her dance lesson with Ron is admittedly hilarious, but the subsequent ball is cornball in the extreme. The supposed attraction between bickering pals Ron and Hermione feels entirely forced, evoking memories of Han Solo and Princess Leia in "Return of the Jedi" (at least Harry and Hermione don't turn out to be siblings).

These awkward growing pains are admittedly typical for any series with the ambition to mature along with its characters. If the introduction of hormones doesn't quite work here, the emergence of evil does. Brendan Gleeson adds a welcome dash of anarchy to the proceedings as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher 'MadEye' Moody, but it is Harry's arch-enemy Voldemort (stealthily embodied by a noseless Ralph Fiennes) who produces a serious jolt. The film's final act is deadly serious, representing the defining turning point of the franchise and superbly setting the tone for everything that followed.

Pensieve Moment: I ran into Harold Ramis at an Evanston screening of "Goblet of Fire," and got to meet his two sons, both of whom were avid Potter fans. Years later, Ramis told me that he had pursued the film rights before any of the books had been adapted. When the studio offered him to direct book 3 or book 4, he replied, "Well, this franchise isn't going to last..."

5.) Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (2007)



Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

“I’m not weak!” Harry yells at the ever-contemptible Snape, who coldly replies, “Then prove it.” And prove it he did. After carrying four epic pictures on his slender shoulders, Radcliffe finally became an actor of considerable presence, in no small part because of the guidance he received from co-star Gary Oldman (quietly moving as Harry’s godfather Sirius Black) and director David Yates (“The Girl in the Café”).

As the increasingly isolated Harry watches many of his closest allies vanish, Radcliffe hits dramatic notes he was never able to reach at a younger age, and his work has only gotten better ever since. “Phoenix” is perhaps Rowling’s most pointedly political book, with its corrupt Ministry of Magic sending authoritarian representatives to control Hogwarts, brainwashing students into believing that they aren’t in any immediate danger.

The initial appearance of Voldemort in “Goblet” casts a dark pall over the remaining installments, though it also allows the filmmakers to probe deeper into the material. “Hem hem”-ing Ministry meddler Dolores Umbridge (brilliantly played by Imelda Staunton) is no pushover villain. She is a terrifyingly authentic bureaucrat whose benign smile conceals a brutish determination to control and suppress everything in her path. This forces the students to teach themselves the vital lessons they can’t learn in school, resulting in a climactic battle as exciting as any big-budget effects sequence in recent memory. Yet it is Yates’s gift for intimate character studies that remains his greatest asset. The pacing is a bit off, mainly because Michael Goldenberg’s screenplay is uneasily condensed. Kloves is sorely missed, but I assume the guy figured he deserved a one-picture break.

Pensieve Moment: It took me forever to get through “Phoenix,” and not because it was the largest of the novels. It’s because Umbridge enraged me to such a passionate degree that I repeatedly threw the book across my bedroom, which was no small feat.

4.) Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (2002)



Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Released a mere year after “Sorcerer’s Stone,” this rollicking installment is grand entertainment from beginning to end and the best work of Chris Columbus’s career. Perhaps because the plot is strikingly similar to its predecessor, it enabled the filmmakers to improve their efforts in all departments: the suspense is heightened, the gags are funnier, the storytelling is more confident and the horror is much, much spookier. The last half unfolds into a monster movie with real fangs, though Columbus still makes it palatable for little (albeit brave) kids.

It also proved to be the final film in the magnificent career of Richard Harris, who died soon after production wrapped. It’s obvious that Harris was ailing on the set, but his wispy voice and dignified elegance proved to be appropriate for the role of Hogwarts Headmaster Dumbledore in the early pictures, when the character was more mysterious and larger-than-life to the owl-eyed Potter. His passing brought added poignance to the scene in which he teaches Harry about the death and rebirth of his beloved phoenix.

Shirley Henderson scores big laughs as the helium-voiced Moaning Myrtle, while Kenneth Branagh displays aloofness worthy of Ted Baxter as the latest blowhard elected to the position of Dark Arts teacher (seriously, that position is as doomed as a “Spinal Tap” drummer). The whimsical humor lacking in later installments is never more delightful than it is here. There’s a screaming telegram from Mrs. Weasley (Julie Walters) that brings down the house, as does a grotesque mandrake lesson taught by Professor Sprout (Miriam Margoyles).

Harry’s discovery that he can speak “Parseltongue” causes him to reflect on the numerous unsettling similarities he has to Voldemort, yet it also leads to one of the funniest bits in the series. When Hermione tells Harry that hearing voices isn’t a good sign—even for wizards, a man in a framed picture turns to Harry and says, “She’s right you know.” It’s a throwaway detail, but the kind that makes Rowling’s work such an addictive pleasure.

Pensieve Moment: I was so psyched for “Chamber” that I attended a midnight screening with a lightning bolt scribbled on my forehead. I couldn’t believe the number of autographs I ended up signing.

3.) Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (2009)



Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

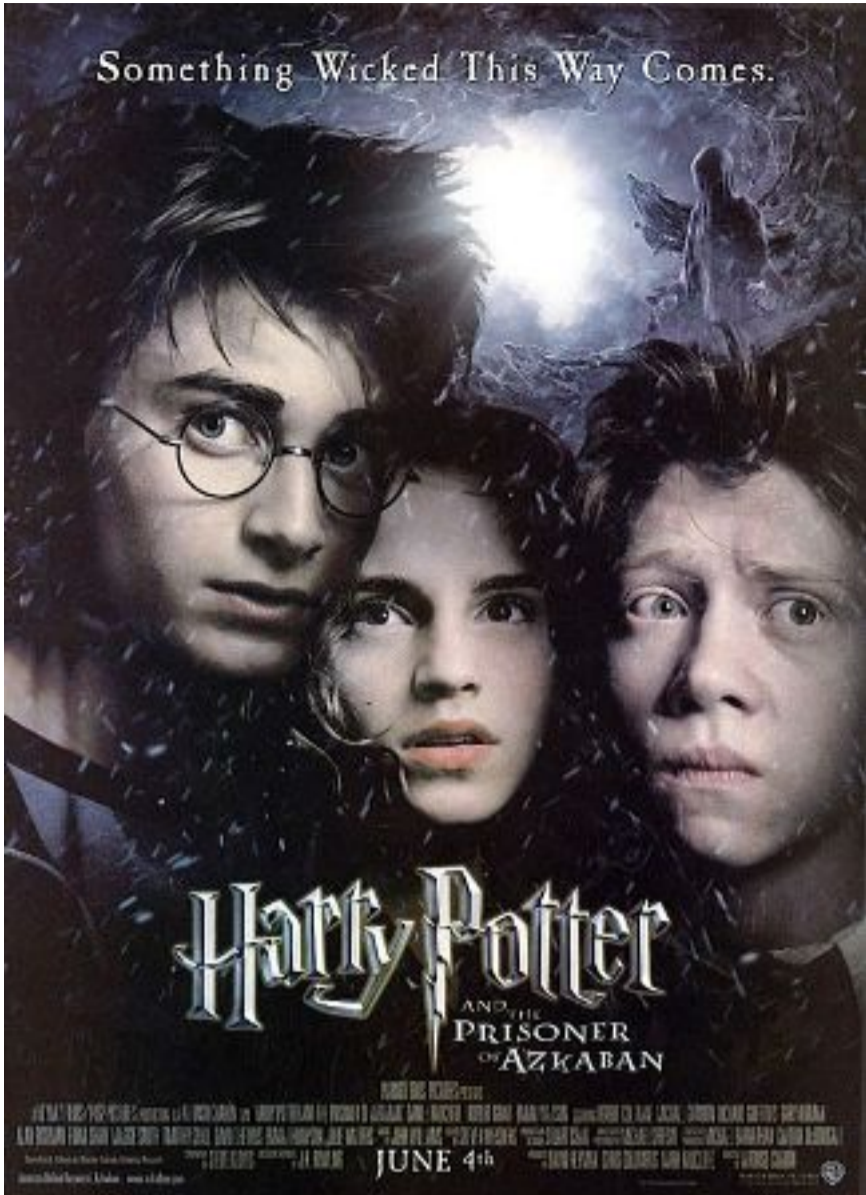
Just as Columbus's sophomore "Potter" effort was his triumph, so is "Half-Blood Prince" for Yates. With Kloves back on board, this film greatly enriched a plot that was essentially one extended prelude to the final book. Instead of smothering the dialogue in exposition, Yates focuses instead on key character nuances, allowing the story to breathe in spots where it would undoubtedly be breathless in the hands of a less perceptive filmmaker. There isn't a moment in this 153-minute epic that feels sloppily constructed or badly paced.

In his first post-"Equus" performance as The Boy Who Lived, Radcliffe is looser and livelier than ever, even as the tale builds to a notorious sequence of operatic tragedy. Yates's command of tone is impeccable throughout, balancing hypnotically frightening flashbacks (via a Pensieve) of a young Voldemort (played with startling intensity by Frank Dillane and Hero Fiennes-Tiffin, nephew of Ralph) with sequences of great humor and warmth. Ron's love potion intoxication and Harry's cocky transformation under the influence of Liquid Luck give the film some welcome levity, as does the beguiling Evanna Lynch, who brings such vibrant life to loopy student Luna Lovegood that it makes one wish Rowling had written her as Harry's love interest.

Unfortunately, that role is taken by Ron's little sister, Ginny, played by the jarringly wooden Bonnie Wright (her kissing scene with Harry is by far the weakest thing in the picture). Yet that hardly matters in light of the film's multiple strengths, such as the marvelous turn by Jim Broadbent as the well-meaning Professor Slughorn, or the newfound vulnerability delivered by Tom Felton, whose bratty character of Malfoy often felt distressingly one-note. However, I will say it's probably a good thing that this is the last "Potter" film to feature a Quidditch game, since the broomsticks have begun to look painful, not to mention a tad...um, phallic.

Pensieve Moment: The climactic sequence set in an ominous underground basin was exactly as I had pictured it in my mind. It was the moment when I first fell in love with Yates's measured, foreboding approach to the material. He had built such a viscerally tense atmosphere that by the time a hand popped out of the water in classic "Carrie" fashion, the entire audience jumped out of their seats.

2.) Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (2004)



Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Though this first non-Columbus installment may be considered by some fans as the oddball of the series, it is utterly exhilarating, even as the entire production momentarily buckles under the weight of its own ambition. Alfonso Cuarón (“Children of Men”) was the first person to transform Rowling’s text into a work of cinematic art. No director before or since has taken as visionary and audacious an approach to the material.

The last act initially overwhelms with a burst of complex plot twists during a confrontation scene that plays like a screenwriting train wreck, but the following sequences, in which story fragments click together in exuberantly satisfying fashion, more than compensate for the confusion. Cuarón is more interested in evoking the mood and spirit of the books than becoming enslaved by their plots. He pays for it a bit in the end, but his efforts were worth it.

Some of the best details in the film occur in the corners of the frame: the dire fate of a bird perched upon the Whomping Willow, the Igor-like innkeeper who silences his car with a Muggle-made remote, the bobbing figure of Harry’s inflated Aunt Marge (played by Pam Ferris, who ironically played the Trunchbull in “Matilda”), etc. Radcliffe has said in interviews that Cuarón was the first filmmaker who instilled in him a passion for cinema.

The director gives Radcliffe a smashing showcase, but the actor still isn’t quite up to the acting challenges, relying on his tendency to breathe heavily through gritted teeth when attempting to show emotion (a tick he still has yet to shrug off). But Cuarón does push Radcliffe out of his comfort zone in scenes where his adolescent angst causes him to lash out at the world at the same time as his friends (Hermione’s knuckle sandwich served to Malfoy is a rousing crowd-pleaser). The addition of Michael Gambon as Dumbledore is crucial, since he lacks the warmth of Harris, turning the character into a tangible and fallible being with a sly wit to boot. The more you love cinema, the more likely it is that Cuarón’s masterwork will leave you dazed and dazzled.

Pensieve Moment: I ended up forcing two buddies of mine to see this one with me in the theater. Neither of them wanted to be caught dead in a Potter line. We ended up seeing it on a double bill with the execrable Vin Diesel vehicle, “The Chronicles of Riddick.” As “Azkaban”’s end credits began to roll, my friend Steve turned to me and said, “Hey, this Potter stuff isn’t too bad...”

1.) Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1 (2010)



Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

To say this latest installment is the best of the series is somewhat of a gamble, since it's technically the first half of the picture. But as a standalone work, it is simply extraordinary. As much as I loved the previous "Potter" pictures, I was extremely skeptical about Warner's decision to split the final film in two. It all smelled suspiciously like a moneymaking scheme that could potentially botch the saga's crucial final chapter. The fact it has strengthened the adaptation above and beyond all expectations is a triumph attributable to Yates, who utilizes the extra running time to explore the characters with a depth that wouldn't be possible in a mere two-and-a-half hours.

Without the comforting structure of a school year or the ensemble of veteran acting legends to back them up, Radcliffe, Grint and Watson are given the opportunity to truly shine. They do not disappoint. As the three friends become stranded in the woods while evil forces lurk about, the tension and claustrophobia resonates on an achingly real level. For the first time ever, the attraction between Ron and Hermione feels genuine. When Ron suspects that his friends are conspiring behind his back, his enraged outburst has none of the usual Weasley-esque cuteness. If I had to choose which young actor has evolved the most over time, it has got to be Grint, whose portrayal of the wounded and moody best friend is both riveting and drolly funny (without an ounce of overacting).

As for Radcliffe, he excels during a priceless sight gag where various characters morph into Harry, allowing the actor to briefly display his versatility. Even Dobby, the obnoxious house elf from "Chamber," proves to be lovable this time around, a sure sign that the franchise has learned from its past missteps. Yates appears to have taken a cue from Cuarón in terms of his visual richness—there's a magnificent animated sequence used to cinematically convey the meaning of the Deathly Hallows. Yet the best sequence is also the one dreamed up purely by the filmmakers: Harry and Hermione's impromptu dance to "O Children" (by Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds), which manages to say more about their relationship than any amount of dialogue ever could. It removes every last shred of doubt that Yates is the right man to bring this franchise in for a landing.

Pensieve Moment: "Deathly Hallows" was the only Potter book I read all in one go. I was hellbent in ensuring that no killjoy ruined the ending for me. So in the midst of my hectic college schedule, I managed to set aside an entire day and read the book cover to cover. It was a euphoric experience. When "Part 1" arrived in theaters, I flew out to see it with my sister at a theater near her new apartment. Now she's flying in to see "Part 2" with me ten years after we experienced the first one together. Regardless of the final film's merit, it's guaranteed to make for a magical night.



[14]

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [15]
Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
matt@hollywoodchicago.com [14]

Source URL (retrieved on Apr 19 2024 - 7:15am):

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/14873/film-feature-harry-potter-and-the-legacy-of-a-franchise>

Links:

[1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/briantt>
[2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/alan-rickman>
[3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/daniel-radcliffe>
[4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/david-yates>
[5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/emma-watson>
[6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/film-feature>
[7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/harry-potter>
[8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/harry-potter-and-the-deathly-hallows-part-2>
[9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
[10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/jk-rowling>
[11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/list>
[12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/matt-fagerholm>
[13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/ruport-grint>
[14] <mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com>
[15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#MATT>