

# 500 Words or Less Reviews: Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald

\*This review will be spoiler-free.\*

One of the biggest complaints I heard about the original *Fantastic Beasts* movie was that it was so far removed from the original series, it didn't feel like a *Harry Potter* story. To me, it still had a good plot and great characters and is worth rewatching, but I sympathize with that complaint.

*Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* gives us much more of the original canon in subtle and overt ways, but still does a fine job of keeping the narrative separate from Harry's era at Hogwarts so that it can stand on its own legs and tell a fresh story without the weight of massive book scrutiny.

Eddie Redmayne is back as the peculiar Newt Scamander, who another character aptly describes as a man who doesn't care for power or prestige but for what is right. Scamander may not ever rise to the level of characters like Hagrid and McGonagall in my mind but he is a welcome addition to the *Harry Potter* universe.

They chose Newt's book to be the title of these films and while the films themselves are not truly about the beasts that he loves so much, they do play a significant role in plot development. And Newt unleashes a new, wondrous, Jim Henson-esque creature that steals some scenes.

Johnny Depp is surprisingly quite modest in his titular, antagonist role. For a man who has made a living off of being magnificently weird as unique characters, he doesn't try to do

too much here. I suppose the backstory from the original series, the characters "look" and the script are enough and he doesn't have to be outrageous to bring Grindelwald to life. If anything, I thought he was too subdued.

Jude Law is as brilliant as you would expect and Dan Fogler reprising his role as Jacob is even funnier and more sympathetic than the first go round. The rest of the cast is a mixture of decent to bland.

There are twists galore in this movie but I must see the rest of the series before I can judge them.

On that note, without revealing anything, I will conclude by saying the ending will have people talking until the third part is released. And my only comment in this review is to say that it is imperative to me that they do not make the same mistakes that were made with *The Cursed Child*. As mentioned, a significant part of what makes these movies work so far to me is that they are separated from the seven-book/eight movie story enough that they can let these movies breathe without fear of them clashing with the original. They may be nearing dangerous waters.

The *Harry Potter* brand is clearly at a crossroads. The crucial plot decisions of these next three movies will swing the post-book series material either into the "It was nearly all terrible" or "Fantastic Beasts was fantastic and we barely remember *The Cursed Child*." I'm eager to see the result.

Three stars out of five.

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# 500 Words of Less Reviews: The Count of Monte Cristo (Book)

Sprawling, epic, multifaceted, ingenious. Those are just four great words that describe the 1462-page unabridged copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. This massive work was written by Alexandre Dumas. It was published in 18 installments in a popular French newspaper. Do you want to know what happens? Everything. Everything happens. The tale recounts the long story of the young, promising seaman Edmund Dantes. On the eve of his marriage to the beautiful Mercedes, three jealous rivals (technically four, but he is very drunk and doesn't really know what's going on) plot to get him thrown into prison for treason.

Halfway through this term, he is on the brink of madness and committing suicide when he meets the kindly, wise, industrious and extremely knowledgeable Abbe Faria. For the next few years, the abbe bequeaths to Dantes all of his substantial earthly knowledge and on his final deathbed the knowledge of a vast fortune hidden on the island of Monte Cristo. After the death of his friend, teacher, and mentor, Dantes escapes and indeed finds this mountain of treasure securely hidden on the island for many, many years.

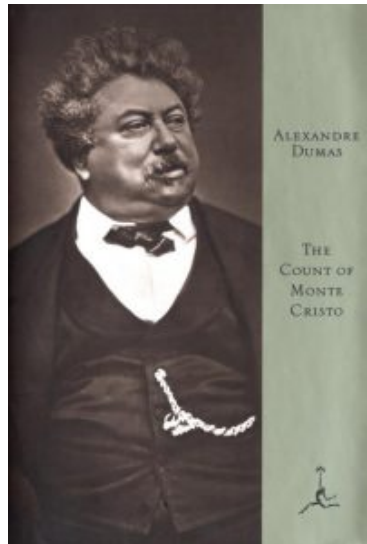
Despite the wise words of the abbe that revenge will not bring him peace, Edmund (who now calls himself *The Count of Monte Cristo*) spends the next ten years concocting an incredibly complex plan of vengeance of the men involved in his wrongful imprisonment with almost 1200 pages worth of carrying out his end game.

The synopsis I have just given might be sufficient to describe

the recent 2002 movie adaptation of the book (it is to that popular adaptation I will be referring to when I mention the film version), but it is certainly not an adequate representation of the novel itself. The staggering complexity of the novel is something the movie did not even hint at. I love the movie, I really do, but it is barely an outline of the real deal. It is really only minorly inspired by the full story. The real story is infinitely more complex, rich, and, as mentioned, sprawling. When I say that everything is in this book I mean there is just that. And that is only a slight exaggeration. There is action, adventure, mystery, comedy, drama, romance, and at least a hundred subgenres in each of these genres. There are stories in stories and stories in stories in stories.

There are so many richly drawn characters and subplots here that for sizable chunks of the book the count isn't even involved or is but a secondary character. One of the overarching of these characters: God. Not surprisingly, almost all talk of God is exempt from the theatrical rendition. As a result, I think the ending is very different and the conclusions of the count are very different from the cut and dried tale on film.

In conclusion, although the trip is long and sometimes tedious, it is a trip incredibly worth it. Here's to them making the wise decision to make this into a two-week miniseries.



This is the cover  
of the edition I  
read.

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## 500 Words or Less Reviews: Ken Burns' The Vietnam War

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's 10-part documentary "The Vietnam War", highlighting the U.S. involvement in Vietnam through the mid-50s to mid-70s, is a profoundly well-made one. Nevertheless, some who lived during these times have criticized the two for skewing the material in various ways.

On the other hand, the miniseries has the approval of the nationally respected organization, Vietnam Veterans of America. In his review on behalf of the VVA, Marc Leepson, states they feared the worst of the miniseries, the making of which they were never consulted. But he says they were largely delighted with the well-presented production that lays out an accurate, balanced depiction of the events (You can view Leepson's review [here](#).)

The documentary begins things in 1898 at the beginning of the Vietnamese struggle against French colonialism, the French would lose control to the Japanese during World War II, followed by a failed attempt by France to take it back after the war.

The now independent Vietnam became steeped in a bitter civil war between communist northern Vietnam and increasingly politically corrupt southern Vietnam. In the U.S. fight against all faces of communism, the U.S. sided with South Vietnam. The nearly 20-year U.S. involvement in Vietnam was done under the authorization of five U.S. presidents and a host of other politicians who carried it out with a combination of pride, political ambition, and misunderstanding of the Vietnamese people. The official start date for our involvement is said to be 1955. After the U.S. fighting forces finally left in 1973, the now dependent South Vietnamese army was left to defend itself and failed miserably.

The 10-part, 17.5-hour miniseries is told via video clips; historic sound recordings; snapshots; the narration of Peter Coyote; and the first-hand commentary from many of the players involved. These commentators present an extremely heartfelt collage of the many facets of what went down during those many years. Included are both Vietnamese and U.S. individuals. Without exception, all of these commentators are very well spoken and articulate clearly their very strong feelings for this bloody chapter of world history. In the closing minutes of the final episode, many of the main commentators are today revealed to be writers of memoirs, poetry, and novels; counselors; historians; teachers; career military officers; doctors; and judges.

Each episode begins with a "Viewer Discretion Advised" warning, alerting viewers that the following episode contains mature content, strong language, and graphic violence. This is well deserved. Most of this material is expected because of the nature of the subject, but there is also a gratuitous,

unnecessary topless Jane Fonda video clip (episode 9, from 1:26:25 to 1:27:02).

And then there is the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a moving tribute of the many thousands of U.S. soldiers who died in Vietnam. Many who were very skeptical of such a memorial came to tears at the first sight of it, some collapsing in emotional exhaustion. This miniseries itself is a beautiful memorial and should be viewed by all Americans above the age of 13.

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## 500 Words or Less Reviews: The War

Filmmaker Ken Burns is probably most famous for creating the documentary miniseries, *The Civil War* (1990), and for good reason. It is a documentary masterpiece. In the years since he has made several other series on a variety of other historical subjects. Hoping to recapture the magic of *The Civil War*, my sister and I recently watched his 2007 World War II series *The War*. While it did not match *The Civil War* in thoroughness or filmmaking magic, *The War* was nonetheless extremely good.

As for the thoroughness, the film is clear about its limited scope and its rationale for such. Each episode is introduced with these two lines: "The Second World War was fought in thousands of places, too many for any one accounting. This is the story of four American towns and how their citizens experienced that war." I would not be a bit surprised to learn that he put this here specifically because test audiences kept complaining that the series was a limited look at World War II. In effect, this two lines explained that World War II was

so huge that it would be impossible to give a complete look at it in a mere seven-episode series. No, instead it looked at multiple stages of the war as seen through the eyes of Americans from Waterbury, Conn.; Sacramento, Calif.; Mobile, Ala.; and Luverne, Minn.

All of the commentaries are people from one of these towns and were individuals who either fought in the war or normal American citizens who were drastically affected by the war in various ways. Unlike *The Civil War*, there is no commentary by experts like historians. The people who lived these things are the only experts we get. This is just fine because hearing the testimonies of these people who actually lived it makes it more real, more poignant. It gives audiences a closer, more emotional, look at things like the plight of Japanese Americans; life in America during World War II; life for Americans imprisoned by the Japanese in a Philippine internment camp; and, of course, soldiers who fought in the war on a multiplicity of fronts.

Although most of them are not technical experts in any historical area, the selection of those individuals who commented was excellent casting. All of the now elderly people chosen had a kind of indescribable charm, a respectability, an impeccably honorable essence. Even more so, for obvious reasons each of them clearly felt deeply about the subject matter. It was this that more than anything else added to the enrichment of this story. They were *The War's* secret weapon. The seven episodes will take you on a journey all over the world through the eyes of these American citizens who lived and saw the horror, saw the greatness, experienced the time that changed their lives and impacted the world forever.

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# 500 Words or Less Reviews: To Kill a Mockingbird (Film)

In 1960, Harper Lee published her masterpiece, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It has since become one of the most beloved books of millions of readers. The movie adaptation of the book bearing the same name was released just two years after its original publication. One might have thought that since the movie was released so quickly after the book's first appearance it would be extremely good at best, but it is debatably the greatest movie adaptation of a book ever. (To be honest, there are several others that are very close contenders. Nevertheless, TKaM gets my vote.)

In the year it opened, *To Kill a Mockingbird* garnered eight nominations at the Oscar's, winning three of those. But moviegoers recognized that it was more than merely one of the best movie of the year; both critics and audiences rightly saw it as one of the greatest movies of all time. It has maintained that status.

I don't think anything made by mankind is ever perfect. Things that we do and make can always be perfected in some way. But I do admit that there are some things pretty close to perfection. This particular work of art directed by Robert Mulligan fits well in that category.

There is so much to appreciate here, from the mastery of the music, the directing, the writing, the cinematography, etc. Everything clicks, everything turns like a well-oiled movie machine, a projector, if you will. A good argument could be made that the acting is the film's most outstanding feature. This is particularly true of its three main actors: Gregory Peck (Atticus Finch), Mary Badham (Scout Finch), and Phillip Alford (Jem Finch). This is Peck at his award-winning and iconic finest, which is actually no surprise. Peck is always

so good at his profession that he could probably out-act most actors at acting while gagged, tied, and encased in a coffin—and still win an Oscar. No, the actual surprise here is the acting of Badham and Alford, neither of whom had been previously trained but who both did a superb job carrying most of the movie alone.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in a quaint little town and looks at the world from the young vantage points of Scout and Jem. The story is a coming of age one of sorts. Along their young journey they get their first real glimpse into the adult world filled with its selfish pride, racism, death, and hatred. In the midst of this stands the pillar that is their father, Atticus, a lone bulwark of wisdom and mercy and grace and love.

Along the journey, they will adventure with their best friend Dill Harris, and encounter unforgettable characters like Boo Radley (portrayed by Robert Duvall in his debut film appearance), Tom Robinson, Calpurnia, Mayella Ewell, Bob Ewell, and many other wonderful and colorful people.

Lastly, a final shout-out to legendary composer, Elmer Bernstein, for the film's haunting, beautiful, utterly timeless soundtrack.

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## **500 Words or Less Reviews: “Tyndale, The Man Who Gave God An English Voice”**

“And the Lyght shyneth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not.” (*John 4:5, William Tyndale New*

*Testament)*

I'm coming up on 40 years of life this Summer and it has me all self-reflective and evaluative. One thing I absolutely need to change is that I need to read more biographies. As someone who has championed fantasy-fiction as reading that captures the imagination, I have woefully underestimated how real flesh and blood human beings with real lives can accomplish the same thing. And in some ways, in a deeper sense, since they are actual history.

Enter this book, written in 2012 by David Teems. It is cleverly written, packed with history down to the small players in Tyndale's life and absolutely edifies the English-speaking Christian reader with a life worth dissecting.

I confess that Tyndale's life is fascinating to me on the big story arcs because I am a pastor of a bilingual ministry, an ESL teacher and a subscriber to *Voice of the Martyrs*. Translation is my life's work, though not nearly to the significance that his was and to the cost that his gave. Persecution and martyrdom are horrific in a human sense, yet biblically we can see how God exalts it. William Tyndale literally gave his life to give people of my native tongue one of the most precious gifts there is, the readable Word of God.

Christian history is indebted to countless people for the Bibles we have today, many of them nameless and faceless, like the Masoretics of the Old Testament and the often maligned scribes and copyists of the New Testament. Tyndale thankfully is a name we can know and celebrate. He wasn't just a translator. He was a noble man, an educated yet humble man, and a great man. He is a hero. All of us who hold a KJV, or NASB, or NIV in our hands should know his name and his story.

Beyond the major and more well-known plot lines of his life, Teems gives other details that are equally as important. Like

how much of the KJV was influenced by Tyndale and how many phrases we find in our Bible, and hence our popular culture, that can be traced back to Tyndale. Like “Am I my brother’s keeper?”. Tyndale used beautiful, easy-to-memorize, poetic English. And we owe our ability to recall many verses so easily to him.

Teems also speaks over several pages to how much Erasmus and Luther affected Tyndale and how much he affected them. These men were not friends, yet God used them all in their own way to greatly affect how we do church and bible study today. It is a testimony to how no one can do anything on their own. Not just without God’s grace, but without Christian community. Even from a distance.

I recommend this book to all Christian teenagers and adults. It’s not just an inspiring story, but an illuminating one. In 500 years, this story will still matter. Yet let us read it today.

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## **500 Words or Less Reviews: Ready Player One**

Time warps our memories of things we once loved in various ways, and when enough time goes by, the exact memories we had begin to slip away from us like sand through an hourglass. When we finally are able to come back to the thing itself, whether a good book or a Nintendo game played with a trusty NES controller, some pieces of time come shooting back up to us through the hourglass. For a moment, we are reconnected to those past memories and versions of ourselves. And yet, we have changed in that time span. Our perception of what we are

able to experience again is colored by eyes that have since matured and have felt more of the weight of the world.

I read the book version of "Ready Player One" almost two years ago, so it's fitting that enough time has gone by for me to forget key scenes or details from the plot. It's like my memory of what happened has since dissolved into fragments. During the early screening for the film, I was sitting between a close friend and a random stranger, and all three of us had read the book. We discussed a few scenes, and the plot progression started to come back to me. My anticipation started to build. Would the film deliver, or would it let me down?

When I first heard that the *Ready Player One* movie was in production, I wasn't too thrilled. The book was an ambitious and expansive imaginary romp through 80's nostalgia. "They'll never pull a movie like this off convincingly," I told myself. The trailers left a lot to be desired because it looked like they were going to change the plot significantly. And they did.

But you know what? Somehow it worked.

After the movie, the three of us sat and reflected on what we had just watched. The movie had the overall feel of an 80s adventure flick, Spielberg style. It felt like what author Ernest Cline (who was part of the creative process on the film) might have done with the plot in a parallel universe. My biggest fear going into the movie would be that it would turn out to be a heartless, piecemeal version of what I had experienced and loved while reading the book, but I was quite happy to be wrong. Yes, parts of the movie felt a bit rushed or contrived, and I was still miffed at a few parts of the book that didn't make it into the movie, but overall I was very glad to have seen it.

The movie left me feeling a bit bizarre because it was like

what I had once experienced, yet it was different altogether. It's akin to playing a favorite game from your childhood that is now radically different in form, yet still retains the original essence of what you had enjoyed in the past.

8/10

(Parental content advisory: There are a few strong curse words throughout the PG-13 rated film.)

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## **500 Words or Less Reviews: The Secret Life of Walter Mitty**

I watched *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* in August of 2014. It was a passion project for Ben Stiller, the director and lead actor on the film. It is an adaptation of the short story by James Thurber. It is a very sincere film. If earnestness gets on your nerves then you probably won't like it. It was rejected by most filmgoers and I am unsure why.[1. The film was not well received, scoring only [51% at Rotten Tomatoes](#) and grossing only \$58 million in the US box office on a \$90 million budget.] It's not perfect and there are a few missteps along the way, but overall, I think the film accomplishes what it sets out to do.

Walter Mitty is a negative assets manager for *Life Magazine*. *Life* is in the process of publishing their final edition – and the negative that is intended to be the cover photo is lost. Walter is tasked with finding it. The film is an interesting blend of reality and whimsical, day-dream type fantasy. Walter loves his job but he yearns for his

life to matter more – to be more fulfilling. As the film progresses we get to watch Walter step out of his comfort zone and start to live the life he has long lived in his dreams.

Few films have challenged me the way this one did. I wrote the following after watching it:

“I have a job that I don’t love. I would rather be doing something else, though I don’t know what. I am not unhappy with my current job. In fact, I am more content at work now than I probably have ever been in my adult life. Yet sometimes, I feel like I ought to be doing something more spiritually rewarding. At least, that is how I feel when I hear Christians talk about jobs and careers.

This movie helped me take stock of my life. I don’t find my identity in my career. I find it in relationships. My standing with God. My relationship with my wife, my kids, my family and my friends. I find my identity in service in my church and outside of it. But, I still feel like there is something more that I should or could be doing.

So, I am going to try to figure that out. I loved how Walter pushed himself and discovered new ways of viewing his life. I want to try to push myself in ways that might make me uncomfortable at first. How that will look is beyond me right now, but I’m going to try to figure it out. I am very comfortable and I don’t think that is a place that God really wants any of us to be. So, I am going to change that, if I can.”

While it was still a year before any real changes happened, this movie was the impetus to getting [Rambling Ever On](#) off the ground. It was an idea we had toyed with for some time, but this movie pushed me to make it a reality. Depending on your opinion of REO, you can thank or curse Walter Mitty.

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# 500WoL Reviews: 12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You

There are two types of information that cause me realize where my weaknesses lie and convict me into wanting to change: well-researched statistics and well-reasoned arguments from the Bible.

So, being a confessed smartphone addict (which I have written about [here](#)) Tony Reinke's new book *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* really impacted me through the use of both.

I had seen it recommended on Twitter several times by people I consider to be wise. And I read it quickly yet carefully. I will probably read it regularly. That is how badly I need the material.

The book is written clearly and unashamedly from a Christian worldview. And as such is able to tie numerical data and Bible together. Reinke doesn't just tell you that people check their smartphones every 4.3 minutes of their waking lives, but also that 73% of smartphone users do so before they do their spiritual disciplines. As someone who believes time with God is important yet still feels deep temptation to check my phone constantly, this speaks to me. The author weaves dozens of Scripture references throughout his profound points about how smartphones affect behavior and thinking. I do not want to think through this issue without theology because I am convinced Christians cannot truly compartmentalize their lives. Reinke makes sure Truth is the main goal and not secular thought on how we change and control our habits through goodness and effort.

The smartphone phenomenon is so new (about 10 years old now)



that this book is groundbreaking to me. The smartphone addiction snuck up on me so quickly and subtly. I was not ready for it. As with all major cultural changes, Christian leaders need to be on the front lines, thinking and researching and communicating their findings. This is definitely that.

This book is peer reviewed; the foreword is by John Piper and has endorsements by people like Russell Moore and Jackie Hill Perry. So you can be assured that even if you do not agree with it all, people who get the Bible and are on the front lines of technology and social media have expressed their appreciation for what Reinke has written.

I have made conscious decisions about how to deal with my addiction as a result of this book and you can read them in the article I linked above. I am very thankful for the inspiration to repent.

If you have a smartphone, and especially if you check it constantly, I strongly recommend this book. Every culture has their sinful vices that are so common that we basically ignore them and I am convinced that time-wasting and narcissism are legitimate threats of the social media and smartphone movements. Yet they are so common they can become invisible, much like the “gossip” prayer request.

Thanks to Tony Reinke for causing people like me to see this issue for the first time.

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**500 + 63 Words or Less**

# Reviews: The Deathly Hallows

It took me almost a year, but I have finally finished my first reading of the 7-book Harry Potter series and it has been quite the ride, one of the best literary adventures of my life. Over the course of my journey I have met wizards, witches, goblins, ghouls, werewolves, house elves, talking portraits, merpeople, centaurs, giants, dragons, and dementors. And this is only a portion of the beings Harry Potter has introduced me to.

While I still consider *The Half Blood Prince* the best book in the series for a variety of reasons, the *Deathly Hallows* is not far behind. It came across to me as the most realistic of the entire lot with its depiction of what a storybook "adventure" would probably be like. There would likely be a lot of wandering about and being unsure as to what to do. People would get irritated with each other, they would get bored with all the wandering around looking for something, and everyone involved would get disillusioned with the whole shebang in varying degrees and forms. Much like the adventure of life itself.

It was also a much different animal in that most of it did not take place in Hogwarts but on the aforementioned climactic adventure. In my opinion, the personal drama that goes on between the three adventurers while the adventure slowly got going is not remotely detracting. In fact, this personal drama made up some of the best parts of the book. There was a heaping helping of meaty characterization to be had there by all three of them.

And there is the other big character of the book who wasn't even around for the vast majority of it. Although he died in *The Half Blood Prince*, Dumbledore's presence is huge in the *Deathly Hollows*. In much of the book it is as though he were symbolic of the God of Scripture with Harry constantly

questioning him and why he didn't explain this or that while he was alive. Whether or not Rowling really meant for this to be the case when she wrote it, I don't know, but the likeness is strong.

We also learn a lot about Dumbledore's personal backstory and that he wasn't perfect after all. Like everyone else, he had baggage, baggage that for him directed the course of the rest of his life. It is brilliant characterization of a character that had already left the world of our story.

*The Deathly Hallows* is a fitting culmination of all the preceding acts. And we take many a sad farewell (for the present) of Hermione, Ron, the other Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks, Mad Dog Moody, Luna, Neville, Hagrid, McGonagall, and many other unforgettable characters that have left on us a lasting impact. Oddly, though, the departure the most emotional to me, was the farewell of the Dursleys. Those Muggliest of all Muggles who treated Harry like so much trash for so long somehow managed to worm their way into my heart. I'll miss them.

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That is the end of my 500WoL. Here is my personal ranking of the seven books:

1. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*
2. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*
3. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
4. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*
5. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*
6. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*
7. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*