

You talking 'bout my generation?



The screenwriter, director and stars are all twentysomething. So how well does *Reality Bites* portray us?

By Michael Horowitz, *Daily Bruin*, UCLA

When director Ben Stiller's *Reality Bites* made its debut at the Sundance Film festival in January, it was touted as "the twentysomething film we've all been waiting for." Moviemakers had already decided that this film should define the values, concerns, fears and ambitions of our age group. And the world waits...

Fearing a backlash from the intended audience, Stiller and screenwriter Helen Childress have since played down the movie's generational implications. They maintain *Reality Bites* is a love story, and people our age will relate to the characters.

"We've been kind of shying away from calling it a generational movie; they're trying not to market it like that," says Helen Childress, the film's 23-year-old screenwriter. "The danger is you say you're doing one thing, and then you don't do it, and you're kind of busted."

Reality Bites is a comedy and a love story about people in their 20s. The film's central character, Lelaina Pierce (Winona Ryder), and her close friends (Ethan Hawke, Janeane Garofalo and Steve Zahn) graduate from college as the film starts and are now caught up in the quest for a "real" job and economic independence. Only Lelaina's job (working at a television station) is marginally career-oriented; her friends work at newsstands and at The Gap. The fact that Lelaina was valedictorian of her university is no help in employ-

ment and, in one scene highlighted in the film's trailer, is regarded as a hindrance. She and her friends wonder how to make it, how much of their pride they'll have to swallow, and what they should believe in.

These characters are extrapolated from Childress' circle of friends at the U. of Southern California, where she attended the film school. After she applied everywhere (including Wendy's) for a job, and was turned down, Childress became frustrated when she learned her friends were being rejected as well.

"We're intelligent, pretty well-educated people," she shakes her head, "and we're not finding jobs anywhere."

What had begun as a romantic comedy began to take on generational implications. "Articles started appearing and I realized more people were going through the same thing," Childress says. "I thought it would be great if this movie would validate people and make them feel like 'OK, I'm not alone.'"

Childress attributes her immediate success with her script to timeliness. "I think it was honestly right place, right time. Certain elements fell into place. Winona responded to the material."

After the highly successful actress signed on, Childress found herself in the enviable position of working as a screenwriter for a major studio. "Getting a job, I wrote about not having one," she laughs.

Some experiences in *Reality Bites* are easy for people our age to identify with and relate to. Characters in the film hang out watching syndicated reruns, deal with unstable relationships and eat by charging food to their parents' gas cards. Childress obviously identifies

with most of these experiences, but a few she identifies with more than others. "I'm ashamed to say this, but [I identify most] with the scene where they're getting stoned, the conversations, what they're talking about."

The question remains whether the movie is the defining film of a generation. The answer is a qualified no. While people of our age can recognize and relate to many of the characters' concerns and actions, inconsistencies pile up because the film exaggerates for laughs and stereotypes for brevity. Instead of playing up the more subtle aspects of being part of our generation, the film tends to lump us together as a directionless mass of freeloading fast-food workers.

While the roots of these situations may be in reality, despite a young director, writer and actors, the finished product isn't wholly indicative of twentysomething life. Lelaina charges \$900 to her gas card, spends way too much time and money on 900-numbers, and every parent in the film is a caricature.



Childress explains the departure from reality as the byproduct of comedy.

"They were exaggerated for effect," she says. "[The film] wouldn't have got made at all if the plot was styled down or the laughs were styled down."

Childress says the parents were much more developed in the original drafts but were phased out by the studio in favor of a more linear plot.

Stiller, also an actor in the film, defends some of the decisions that leaned in favor of a romantic comedy over commitment to a generational film. "I wanted it to be a love story at the end of the day," he says. "I wasn't worried about making generational statements."

Although *Reality Bites* may not end up being the defining film of our generation, it does have other things to offer. Both the soundtrack and the presence of popular young talents make this romantic comedy one that will attract many viewers from our age group.

In addition, *Reality Bites* was written with an optimistic message in mind, one that Childress hopes viewers take home with them.

She says while the Vietnam generation deconstructed many of the belief systems central to Americans for decades (God, country and family), the post-Vietnam generation lacks these seemingly vital values and beliefs. "It's up to us to start inventing new myths."

"The film asks, 'What is there to believe in?'" says Childress. "And I guess the answer in the film is each other, and love, and [being] true to yourself."

People expecting to identify with this film as they did with so many of John Hughes' films of the '80s or Cameron Crowe's more recent *Singles* may have a more difficult time with this one.

Those who have waited this long for the defining film of Generation X just may have to wait a little longer.

"We're intelligent... and we're not finding jobs anywhere." — Helen Childress, screenwriter