



Would you like to watch a movie about a woman? Or a movie not full of white faces? Maybe later.

That's the theme of this year's Academy Awards Best Picture nominations, which are almost entirely about Great White Men doing Great White Men Things.

The one break in the Great White Trend, *Selma*, got a Best Picture nod that seems horribly like an afterthought, a condolence prize: Neither its director, Ava DuVernay, nor its star, David Oyelowo, were tapped with the golden Oscar wand. DuVernay's absence from the Best Director field highlights the ugly truth about this year's Oscars: It's incredibly white and dominantly male.

I hate the word "snub," as it implies something was a given, but there's something deeply uncomfortable about the *Selma* scenario. Writing for BET.com, Keith Boykin pointed out a pattern in the roles for which black actors win Oscars: For women, those roles are largely as slaves, maids or abusive mothers. Black men have never won for playing famous black leaders, no matter how highly praised those movies, from *Ali* to *Selma*, were.

Movies about slavery, yes. Movies about civil rights, not so much.

On the site Indiewire, Melissa Silverstein made a list of all the women nominated in any Oscar category. It's

disappointingly short. "I wish I was more surprised," she wrote, and I agree. But if you point these things out, if you critique or complain, the internet is quick to nay-say you: *The Oscars don't really matter*, people say. *Why do you care?*

We care because the Oscars do matter. A Best Picture award is no guarantee that a movie is great or even very good. But an Oscar is a marker of power.

An Oscar helps get your next movie made and gives you more control. An Oscar is credibility, whether we agree with that or not. It's not a golden ticket; there are plenty of Oscar winners who never shone as brightly again. But it is recognition and a bit more weight behind your name when you choose which story to tell next.

If this year's Oscars are any indicators, the stories we'll see next will be more of the same. Three of this year's Best Picture nominees are biopics about white men. Alan Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch) and Stephen Hawking (Eddie Redmayne) were geniuses who deserved better films; there's nothing drastically wrong with *The Imitation Game*, but there's nothing notably great about it, either. It gives no insight into Turing (or Keira Knightley's Joan Clarke), just as the watery *Theory of Everything* can't manage to get across a sense of what Stephen Hawking actually did.

Theory did vault Felicity Jones into the actress stratosphere, though, and the filmmakers at least tried to

make a movie about a partnership, not just a man. That's far more than can be said for *American Sniper*, the third biopic, in which Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper) is tiresomely right about everything all the time.

The Best Picture nominees aren't terrible movies. There's no *A Beautiful Mind* among them. But when they aren't biographical tales, they're often in thrall to the idea of the troubled (white, male) genius: the arrogant teacher and cocksure drummer of *Whiplash*, in which women cannot understand the pull of art, or the put-upon actor-director of *Birdman*, which pats itself on the back for being about real art, goddammit, not those stupid movies the plebes like.

The Grand Budapest Hotel is a playful, stylish caper populated almost entirely by men; *Boyhood* is hardly the first movie to present white American boyhood as the default idea of childhood. The story behind Richard Linklater's film is laudably ambitious; the film itself is solid, but hardly jaw-dropping, and contains one of the most racially tone-deaf scenes I watched all year.

Was *The Imitation Game* that much better than *Wild*? Do the Brits of *Theory of Everything* blow you away that much more than the Brits of *Belle*? *Belle* is the same kind of British prestige picture, beautifully filmed, historical, sharply acted. It explores the intersection of race, gender and class with unusual sensitivity. Like *Selma*, it was directed by a woman of color.

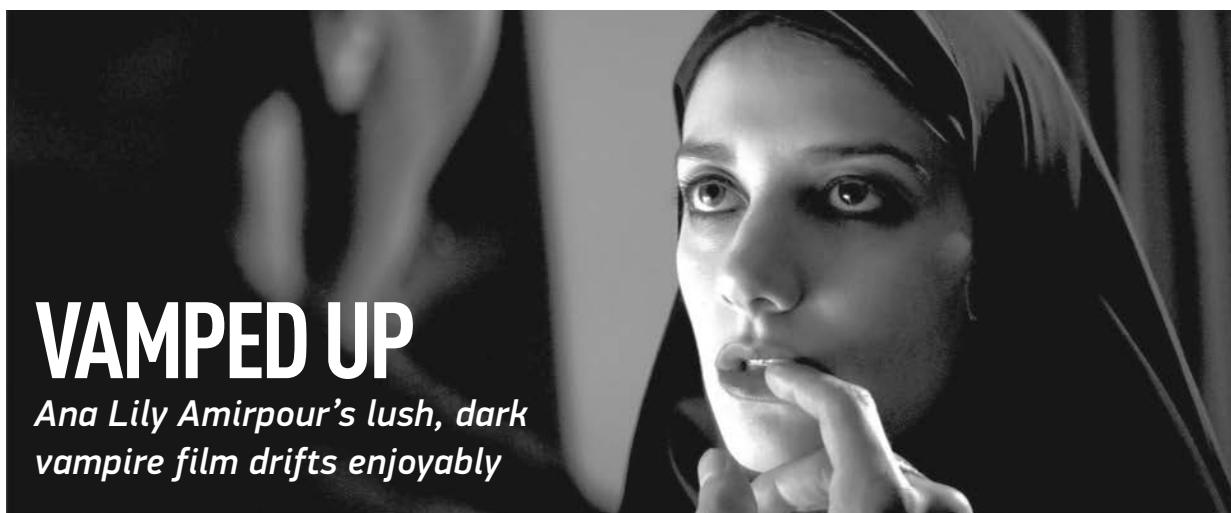
But *Belle* might as well not exist this awards season. Women appear in the acting categories allotted to them, and are nominated for costume design and set decoration. Women of color appear virtually nowhere. The underlying message remains the same: There are *stories*, and then there are women's stories and stories about people of color. And we treat those stories differently.

Awards, like reviews, are subjective. There is no absolute right, no movie or actress or director that is, inarguably, the best. Every year, the fun of Oscar season comes in arguing about it, in making cases and dissecting films and taking things apart to look at their constituent pieces.

There's no fun to be had in this year's discussion. 2014 was tumultuous, simmering, a year of change and heightened awareness and a lot of people waking up to some ugly realities about our world.

But in here, it's the same old story. Some perfectly decent movies get the fairy dust, while other perfectly decent movies get the shaft.

It's funny how that all works out in the great men's favor. ■



There are no other vampire stories like this.

In a strange, dark town — one with few residents but with a bustling drug trade, with rich young women and clever street urchins — a young man named Arash (Arash Marandi) lives with his junkie father and a cat he picks up in the film's opening scenes. Arash is done up to recall James Dean; he's a classic, as is the beautiful car he drives.

Elsewhere in Bad City, a girl (Sheila Vand) lives alone, her walls papered with tokens from the '80s. Iconic posters stare down at her (look closely, though; it's

not Madonna but Margaret Atwood). She listens to vinyl and wears a striped boat-neck shirt that recalls Jean Seberg. The movie she's in is more than a little bit Western: The soundtrack playfully waves at Ennio Morricone, and Bad City is a hotbed of illegal activity, drugs, prostitution and little rich girls buying X at dance clubs. There's no mention of the law. There's just a ditch full of bodies outside town.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night is often referred to as an Iranian Western vampire film, all of which is true but seems like a glib bit of shorthand. Shot in dreamy, lush

black-and-white and full of long silences, it's a story about two loners connecting despite themselves.

High as a kite and dressed as Dracula, Arash meets the girl somewhere in Bad City. He's lost, and he's not afraid of her. (Maybe he should be.) She's wrapped in flowing black and coasting down streets on a skateboard she liberated from another local.

I could watch the nameless girl simply float through the streets of her ghostly town for the duration of writer-director Ana Lily Amirpour's movie, which is slightly overlong and drifty, but enjoyably so, if your tastes are aligned with the director's. The girl goes about her business calmly, a dark figure looming at the end of a street, only her pale face visible under a chador. Silent, deadly, unknowable, she preys on other predators, rendering the world a safer place for other girls and a few good boys.

Though everyone in *A Girl Walks Home* speaks Farsi, the movie was filmed in California; the machinery that looms in the background, silhouetted against a glaring sun, lends a feeling of inevitability to the town and the film. The motions repeat, the patterns converge. Amirpour's vampire isn't the hyperliterate, worldly vampire of Jim Jarmush's *Only Lovers Left Alive*, nor the tortured, dramatic soul of one of Buffy's tormented boyfriends. Her existence is never explained, her peers unmentioned. She's the girl. She's a force of nature. She's fantastic. (*Bijou Metro*) — Molly Templeton