

A Hunger for More Films Like This

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As I mentioned, the film never received a U.S. release; though well-received by Canadian critics, it was described in "Variety" after its Toronto Film Festival run as "grandiose" and "overstuffed." When I think of the number of convoluted battle films I have seen garner accolades, I read these as signs that we have not learned to appreciate the quality of storytelling at work in "Hochelaga: Land of Souls." We have not learned to wonder about all the stories lodged in any particular spot on American soil. This film, which employed 300 indigenous people to play the Iroquois and Algonquin characters and extras, helped me to visualize and to wonder about the ancestors all around us. It deserves a much broader viewing.

"**Eighth Grade**" (fourth on my list of the best films of 2018) is that exceedingly rare film that dares to depict adolescence honestly--unlike the fashionable, air-brushed depictions we generally see where kids are portrayed by art-directed young adults, perpetuating standards of beauty and cool that no actual adolescent could hope to live up to. Even more realistic depictions tend to be played for broad laughs rather than for real insight--yet here writer-director Bo Burnham, assisted by an astoundingly natural lead performance from 14-year-old Elsie Fisher, manages to walk a line between humor and paths that feels aching, horribly familiar--and almost too painful to bear at times. This is adolescence as we want to forget it and mostly do.

Conveying truth at this level takes commitment, and Burnham and his relentlessly real lead actress demonstrate a level of commitment that may disarm you. I can barely stand to look at my eighth grade school picture; I can't imagine living life in the same world as a feature-length film depicting me in all the awkward, shame-filled agony of ado-

lescence. But I happen to believe that radical honesty is a much-neglected tool with the potential to awaken empathy and compassion. We would do well to remember

is kind, earnest, and relentlessly aimed toward good behavior. But to her mortification, she is voted "most quiet" in her eighth grade class and feels acutely her so-



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Elsie Fisher conveys the anxiety and insecurity of adolescence in "Eighth Grade."

that all of us have moments like these in our rear view mirrors if we are brave enough to look.

Burnham, barely out of adolescence himself, has coaxed very natural performances out of all the adolescents in the film, which includes a lot of teenage boys--but he has said that his own struggles with anxiety led to this film's focus on an eighth-grade girl. There is something so epic about what happens to girls at this age; it is as though all the weight of impossible expectations of beauty and assured-but-not-too-threatening competence crash down on them. There are patterns to how girls deal with the pressure--cutting, eating disorders, mean-girl behaviors--but they share a quality of intensity that is uniquely the province of the adolescent girl. For them--I remember It well--the stakes feel stratospheric.

As her devoted but (to her) endlessly irritating father can plainly see, Kayla, the girl at the heart of this film, is a wonderful kid. She

doctored images, and dispenses affirming advice on her own YouTube channel about such topics as "how to be yourself." Although she brightly addresses her audience as "guys" and encourages them not to "care what other people think about you," there isn't much sign that anyone is listening--and it is mostly advice she wishes she knew how to follow. In the hyper-dramatic world of the internet, Kayla misses that the distance between her own reality and what she posts is likely mirrored by the posts that she finds so convincing from everyone else.

In contrast to Kayla's internet world, Burnham (who himself attained actual fame via his own YouTube channel a decade ahead of Kayla) offers a touchingly realistic picture of Kayla's actual world. She is a perfectly lovely kid, but in that awkward, lurching way so common to adolescents. She is never sure what to do with her changing body, makes tragic yet hopeful fashion choices, experiments with makeup (via instructional videos on YouTube, naturally) to distract from skin in the throes of hormonal adjustment. Much of her exasperation at life gets leveled at her dad, who does at good as any parent at balancing giving her room and attempting to engage--yet some of the funniest scenes of the film involve her reacting with irritation to his simplest attempts to connect. Any

adult who has attempted to parent or even to befriend an adolescent will recognize this territory well.

Some of what I appreciated most about the film also involves what is hardest to watch--Kayla's interactions with adolescent boys. She so clearly feels herself in an inferior position, and offers things she shouldn't and doesn't even want, taking the cues the culture gives her--and the boys, too, taking those cues, move for things they don't necessarily want either. Without naming any of these dynamics, Burnham demonstrates how the lies we tell ourselves about love and sex and what makes a person desirable lay traps for both boys and girls. The only comfort here is that, for all her anxiety and insecurity, Kayla has a way of righting herself, though certainly without ever fully appreciating the dangers she has avoided.

The film spends enough time with Kayla to earn some moments at the end confirming that she will be okay. Although her darkest moments feel like agony to her, we also know she is going to be okay. And in a way that may just be (barely) believable, she does too.

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