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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Family viewing

My favorite part of the holidays is watching holiday fare. There are so many options available on broadcast networks and streaming services right now and I have some recommendations. Let's get started.

Every year I watch the Hallmark Channel's Christmas movies. They're generally sappy and formulaic but always with romantic Jane Austen-type endings in which a girl and guy kiss. They typically star white characters except for best friends, bosses, or a mayor or sheriff of a small town. While watching them, I imagine subtext like "I didn't know we had a Black mayor" or "I love my Asian best friend because she never has a problem of her own."



Over the Moon is an animated musical feature centered on a Chinese family and mythology about a moon fable. (Image courtesy of Netflix)

Not this year. The Hallmark Channel finally awakened to the fact that people of color actually watch these corny movies, and advertisers pay money to show commercials to them. Though they are still on the cookie-cutter side of filmmaking, there are two that bubbled above the sap, and they star Asian-American women.

Holly & Ivy stars Janel Parrish, a biracial Asian-American woman who plays Melody, a recent graduate who buys a home and tries to renovate it while looking for a job. She builds a friendship with her neighbor, Nina, the mother of two young girls, played by Latinx actress Marisol Nichols. As the women become closer, Nina confides that she's ill and worries about who will take care of her kids. Melody, a former foster child, volunteers to adopt them if something should happen. In the movie, romance takes a backseat; it was reminiscent of specials Hallmark used to create for network TV.

Another Hallmark movie, *The Christmas Bow*, stars Lucia Micarelli as a concert violinist. Micarelli actually is a gifted classical violinist as well as an actress who was incredible in the New Orleans-based HBO series "Treme." The film is a romance, but hearing Lucia play several holiday songs made it all worthwhile. Personally, I loved that another biracial Asian American was starring in one of these Hallmark movies. Another treat is that they showed an interracial mom and dad and her grandfather, played by James Saito, who originally taught his granddaughter to play the violin.

Of all the streaming services, I feel like Netflix has the most to offer people of color. For me, there are two top choices for family films this year.

Over the Moon is an animated musical feature

centered on a Chinese family and mythology about a moon fable. The animation is beautiful at the beginning and end of the film, but a little like an animated video game in the middle. I think it would be appropriate for those age eight and older, as it deals with adult themes of losing a parent and the difficulties of a blended family. It has a great cast with John Cho, Sandra Oh, Margaret Cho, and Ken Jeong (who has a sweet singing voice). Phillipa Soo, who was acclaimed in *Hamilton*, also stars and sings brilliantly.

Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey, based on a children's book, stands as the most imaginative of the new Netflix

family movies. Mixing live action with stop-motion animation and set in a steam-punk, almost Victorian, town of Cobbleton, the story focuses on a toy inventor named Jeronicus, played by Forest Whitaker. When Jeronicus falls on bad times and becomes disconnected from his daughter, his granddaughter rescues him from eviction and failure. The songs are fun and gorgeously sung by Anika Noni Rose, Keegan-Michael Key, Phylicia Rashad, and Whitaker himself. Because it's such a visually stunning fantasy, I believe the movie is appropriate for kids as young as five years old. The acting is quite good, so adults will love it, too.

Though it's not holiday-centric, I also recommend the teen fantasy series "Julie and the Phantoms." It stars a young talent, Madison Reyes, as a middle-school girl whose mom died years before. When the girl is visited by the ghosts of a teen boy band, she forms her own band with them to sing songs about her mom. The story feels authentic, the music is contemporary pop, and the film deals with real-world issues of life and death. I think it would be an ideal show to watch with teens.

There are other offerings for those in high school and college featuring Asian-American cast members, such as "Kim's Convenience" (which is a delightful series about a Korean-Canadian family that runs a convenience store) and "Atypical" (about a high school teen with autism who relies on his best friend and his therapist, both of whom are Asian American). On NBC, a less well-known gem, "Superstore," features two Asian Americans in a sitcom about a large box store and its workers.

There's so much to view as we gather in small groups of family or friends this year. Make some hot chocolate and break out a puzzle to work on while watching. Have a safe and healthy holiday season.