

*Spring 2019*

# FILM TRaC\*

\*teen reviewers  
and critics





## REVIEWS

### *Ash Is Purest White*

(2019, dir. Jia Zhangke)

#### **A fierce young woman and her love for a gangster severely alters her life path.**

*Ash is the Purest White* may not be technically flawless, but it did manage to tell a good story.

*Ash is the Purest White* follows Qiao (Zhao Tao) as she goes on a complex journey to find Bin (Liao Fan) after spending 5 years of her life in prison for saving his life. Although this is a story driven by love, it is not at all a romance. Instead, the film focuses on Qiao's growth as a character, highlighting her internal struggle to find her life's worth and her will to survive the most difficult situations.

Although technically a drama, there are various breaks in serious scenes where the audience can sneak in a laugh. The acting was stellar: seeing the actors age throughout the film was very impressive. Zhao Tao is particularly memorable in her portrayal of Qiao. Even through all the hardships, she manages to remain put together, with subtle expressions of emotion which add to the realness of the film, and show that you don't need to over-act to get your point across.

The plot of the film was easy to understand. However, the editing was very choppy and the overall flow wasn't smooth at all. There were points where there were random jumps in time that were confusing to the audience. For example, one minute Qiao was being transferred from one prison facility to another and the next minute she was on a boat quietly enjoying the landscape: What point in time was this? Did she escape? Is it a flashback? Where even are we? These questions aren't answered until much later.

There was a scene where Qiao gets off the train and stares up into the sky and sees a UFO with 80s synthesizer music in the background (which reminded me

of *Stranger Things*). Immediately after, there is a shot in the middle of the day in a random city. How these two shots are connected, the audience may never know. There was no transition at all in between; the audience is blinded by the harsh light of day after the darkness of the night. Some scenes dragged on too long, however, there were others—such as when Bin confronts Qiao after five years in the hotel—where the dragging on was necessary to illustrate the subtle intensity and awkwardness of the situation, making the film feel more real. After all, life isn't always a series of smooth, quick transitions.

One plot point remained unclear: why Qiao continued to help Bin after so many years of being neglected. Whatever the reason, it is clear that there is some sort of eternal connection between the two that cannot be broken.

*Joñi Honeywell*

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*Ash Is Purest White* tells the story of a young woman, Qiao, and her boyfriend, Bin, who are mobsters in the Chinese city of Datong. A fight breaks out and Qiao is suddenly imprisoned for five years. The rest of the story shows Qiao's adventure as she rediscovers what she has missed during her time in jail as well as finding her new independence as she travels around China.

Through the story, the audience is able to see how Qiao's five years in prison affects her outcome as a person. Director Jia Zhangke is able to show a clear timeline in the film which show Qiao's development in becoming more independent, rather than a sudden quick transition.

In the beginning of the film, Qiao follows Bin around everywhere. After her years in prison, she realizes that she doesn't need the presence of a significant other in her life to enjoy it. This is makes the film so interesting and appealing to watch, as well as creating a bond between Qiao and the audience.



*Ash Is Purest White* is not only the unique story of a gangster Chinese woman in the 2000s, but also the transformation of life in China from 2001 to 2018. Through the movie, the small-store awnings are slowly replaced with glowing neon signs and digital billboards, the flip-phone calls are replaced with selfies sent on WeChat, the small houses are replaced with skyscrapers and condos. The audience is able to see how China's strong traditional culture has mixed together with the new wave of western culture, including a ballroom dance performance at a traditional Chinese funeral and Chinese New Year decorations at a nightclub. These factors of the film give the audience insight on China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in a way which someone who had no knowledge on China could understand.

Overall, while *Ash Is Purest White* may look like an average gangster movie on the outside, it actually shows a past gangster trying to figure out who she is, in the midst of changing China in the early 2000s.

*Isaac Platt Zolov*

### **Little**

(2019, dir. Tina Gordon)

Highly respected businesswoman Jordan Sanders is notorious for getting her way through ruthlessness towards her employers. Accustomed to her lavish lifestyle—a luxury car, apartment and wardrobe—her life is turned upside down once she upsets the wrong little girl. Switched back into the body of her 13-year-old self, Jordan is forced to reconcile with her past while learning how privileged her adult self truly is.

Director Tina Gordon went straight forward with creating a movie with all the latest technology, music, wardrobe and even dance moves. Gordon did a fantastic job at making the movie do what it was supposed to do, make people laugh. There was a great balance between the different types of humor, whether it be deadpan, self deprecating, ironic, and even satirical.

Not many comedy movies end with a

moral, but *Little* was able to force viewers to look at the people around them and wonder if they were truly giving them the respect and love they deserved. *Little* was one of those films that force you to remember the moral but also giggle while thinking back to it.

*Yhara Ozuna*

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Fourteen-year-old Marsai Martin, well known for her role as Diane Johnson on the TV show *Black-ish*, is not only the leading role in the new comedy *Little*, but also the executive producer. Did I mention she's fourteen?

The film has many well-known faces in comedy, such as Regina Hall, alongside Issa

that actually entertains, this film is a must-see.

*Sewayne Thompson*

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### ***Not One Less***

(1999, dir. Zhang Yimou)

*Not One Less* is a poignant movie punctuated by a few interesting choices made by director Zhang Yimou to make the movie more impactful, namely its casting. Rather than hiring professional actors for the roles in the movie, real people were picked in order to play these roles, and given minimal direction besides from how scenes are generally meant to play out. This really helps make the movie more authentic. Instead of watching actors pretend to live in squalor and poverty, the

people we are seeing have done so and know the conditions of the characters that live in the countryside of the movie. It also leads to smaller nuances in the performances that a professional could not emulate, particularly among the child actors.

Another great touch that is monumental to the movie's ability to tug at the heartstrings is how we never drift from the perspective of Wei when she struggles in the city or cut to a montage meant to gloss by the events near the end of the film. No matter how arduous, we are forced to watch Wei hound the passersby of the TV station to find the manager, wander the streets, create notices and sleep on the sidewalks. This may be considered boring, but is monumental towards making the impact of Wei and Zhang crying more effective.

*Jesse Koblin*



Rae, currently starring in the HBO hit series *Insecure*. The film follows Jordan Sanders (Regina Hall), a successful business woman, who is C.E.O. of her own company. She has it all, but her overbearing and harsh attitude to everyone else around her causes her karma, as she's transformed into her thirteen-year-old self. Her assistant April (Issa Rae) helps her correct this, with friends made along the way.

It might seem like the redundant switcheroo plotline seen in films such as *17 Again*, or *Freaky Friday*, but this film keeps it interesting with great acting. Comedy

## *Styx*

(2018, dir. Wolfgang Fischer)

*Styx* was a film centered around a doctor on her vacation to Ascension Island. Traveling in her white sailboat named Asa Gray, her relaxing solo vacation takes a turn for the worse when she comes across a ship of refugees. She desperately tries to call the Coast Guard for assistance, but they all fail to help. After many refugees



jump off the boat looking for refuge on her sailboat, only one person makes it, a teenage boy named Kingsley. The film follows the doctor nursing Kingsley back to health while trying to save the others trapped on the slowly, but surely, sinking boat.

The film's approach was very different from those produced by mainstream media. The editing and sound allowed for viewers to process the information at their own pace. Nothing feels like it's being shoved down the viewers' throat as they are able to submerge themselves in the cinematography.

At times the film could invoke feelings of panic or calmness. Specific scenes like that of her flipping through her book created a sense of serenity. It made it so difficult to look away. The colors on the screen during the flipping of the pages in the book were enough to contrast the neutrals, blacks, and whites which was primarily used throughout the film. These contrast scenes brought in the viewer to

calm anxious feelings as the viewer never knew when the climax would happen. The use of sound throughout the film was tied in meticulously in order to make it stand out as the movie didn't rely on music to create the sense of tone. Instead, director Wolfgang Fischer relied simply on the sounds created by nature to determine the tone of each particular scene. The combination of both techniques created scenes that resonate with viewers even after the film.

The movie could have shown a bit more regarding what she saw when she made it to the boat as well as what the separation was like between her and Kingsley. However, even if it wasn't very conventional, it was an enthralling approach to

have the viewers create their own ending to the movie.

*Yhara Ozuna*

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## *Kiki's Delivery Service*

(1989, dir. Hayao Miyazaki)

*Kiki's Delivery Service* is the story of the titular witch who leaves home at 13 to seek work abroad, finding a city where she opens a delivery service with the help of a kindly baker.

While this plot synopsis may seem extremely paired down, this is really the extent of the story within this film. Sure, there are trials and tribulations for Kiki, and her character changes and grows, but the film is mostly a slice-of-life view. Some may not like this—the movie can feel pretty disjointed, and plot elements not entirely congruous. But this leisurely pace is a small trade-off for the movie as a light, joyful watch. An upbeat color



palette is seen throughout the movie, with washed-out colors only appearing to complement the harder events Kiki must experience. The anime-movie style of having highly detailed backgrounds with simplistic, iconic character design lends itself to the feeling of exploring a colorful and wonderful world.

You do not have to be, or have been, a teenage witch to relate to Kiki. The paired-down plot lets the viewers get attached to her through emotion rather than any flashbacks or sob stories, and this leads to a natural connection. This connection is then used when Kiki experiences hardship, and her character has just enough wiggle room that anyone of any age can at that point transpose themselves on to her and relate to her struggle. That is why this movie retains a timeless quality—it keeps things simple and upbeat, not stopping to dwell on plot minutia or pointless expository moments.

The predecessor to *Kiki* by a mere year is one of the most famous anime films of all time, *Akira*, the story of two friends suddenly thrust into government conspiracy in the wake of nuclear war.

That movie has one of the most enthralling worlds of all time, detailed meticulously to create a living, breathing setting of Neo-Tokyo; yet *Akira* fails to make itself interesting. This is because two integral elements—the characters and the pacing—flounder. *Kiki* is a comparative master class. The movie is given room to breathe, a slow pace that works wonders in bringing us into this world.

*Jesse Koblin*

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*Kiki's Delivery Service* is an animated story about a young witch who is trying to find her way through life once she leaves her family as a witch tradition. The animation style was beautiful and eye-catching. The film gives an empowering feeling towards women as that is the center of all the main and supporting characters in the film. It displays a relatable tale for teenage girls who have lost themselves and are trying to find themselves in the midst of growing up. It also gives a story of maturity as she has to grow up early when she has to find a job to support herself, get

a house on her own, and break away from a piece of childhood comfort, in the form of her pet cat.

*A'Janae Curtis*



**A teenage witch, her delivery service, and a journey to find one's true sense of purpose.**

*Kiki's Delivery Service* was visually captivating. As with all Miyazaki films, it felt as though the audience had just been placed into a watercolor painting. Everything from the city streets to the ocean was beautifully crafted in a way that only Studio Ghibli can do.

The plot was relatively simple and well-executed. The film follows Kiki, a teenage witch and her loyal cat companion Jiji as she leaves home for the first time in search of a new town where she can train. At first, Kiki feels displaced, but after finding new friends and company, she puts her magical powers to use by starting a delivery service. The climax of the film was when Kiki lost her powers, symbolic of her losing her sense of responsibility and belonging. This came too late in the film.

Although meant for a younger audience, adults can easily enjoy this film, as it deals with underlying themes of independence and a sense of purpose. *Kiki's Delivery Service* is a tale of persistence and young woman's journey to find her true self.

*Jonni Honeywell*



***Avengers: Endgame***  
(2019, dirs. Joe and Anthony Russo)

*Avengers: Endgame* does start off a little slow. Around the first act there is little to no action, it is just straight build. I personally have no problem with this because we need that setup to set the tone for the rest of the movie. The reason this is a problem

is because if you are not a Marvel fan like my mom, then you will probably fall asleep during the movie (looking at you mother). The other half of the movie is perfect, everything I thought was gonna happen, happened and more. This movie really delivers when it comes to the action aspect of the movie. The CGI is ridiculously amazing, you won't notice if it's fake or real. What the Russo brothers did with this movie was outstanding. Robert Downey Jr. was amazing in this movie, probably one of his best performance yet. I can't wait to see what Feige and the gang do next.

*Brendon Field*



*Avengers: Endgame* is a satisfying conclusion to the long-running Marvel Cinematic Universe, employing efficient storytelling to tie every loose end that was previously spun.

The movie opens where the *Infinity War* left off—after the infamous Snap destroys half of the organisms in the universe—and wastes no time subverting expectations. After a huge and unexpected twist ten minutes in, the rest of the movie's opening hour is spent overlooking the melancholia of a destroyed Earth in the wake of Thanos. For a movie of this scale, it's great to see this risky move, and this part of the film yields a lot of tender character moments, with good acting coming from all the original cast (Scarlett Johansson, Jeremy Renner, Robert Downey Jr., and the like).

Shenanigans ensue in order to reverse the effects of the Snap, and continuity of the films is played with in an interesting way here, paying homage to the classic *Avengers* from 2012, the wackier space adventure *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and even the drier Asgard content from the *Thor* franchise. This section does a lot to add to the charm of the movie. Unfortunately, a lot of this section's steam is lost with an overly contrived section regarding the character Nebula, a subplot that is far too confusing





for a movie that is otherwise fun, light on thought.

The final battle overcompensates by its gigantic scale, which is really impressive. Almost every character from the MCU makes an appearance here in roles large and small, and deliver awesome moments to boot. A lot of these heroic actions by characters the world has come to know and love are completely earned, resolving character arcs and tying back into scenes from years ago.

*Avengers: Endgame* is everything it should be and then some, ending old stories and starting new ones in an efficient manner. Overall, an excellent movie.

Jesse Koblin

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### ***Pulp Fiction***

(1994, dir. Quentin Tarantino)

The film opens with the definition of pulp as “a soft, shapeless matter; a magazine or book containing lurid subject matter and being characteristically printed on rough, unfinished paper”. This definition does not at all encapsulate the complexities of the narratives in *Pulp Fiction*.

Although it is true that the film is “lurid” and “rough”, (Quentin Tarantino doesn’t

shy away from using explicit language and violence) it certainly is not “shapeless” or “unfinished.” The narrative was excellently crafted and used film in the way it should be, to tell a story.

Jumping back and forth in time between the narratives of Jules (Samuel L. Jackson), Vincent (John Travolta), Mia (Uma Thurman), Butch (Bruce Willis), and Marsellus (Ving Rhames), *Pulp Fiction* shows us the complexity of human relationships and how we interact with each other.

Set in California, the colors used throughout the film are bright and beautiful, mostly pastels that embody the California landscape. Visually stunning, it brings the audience back into the world of the 1990s and complements the dark humor overall.

The soundtrack is one of the best uses of music in a film ever. Featuring songs such as “You Never Can Tell”, “Son of a Preacher Man” and “Jungle Boogie”, the soundtrack helps the audience become emerged in pop culture while enhancing the overall *vibe* of the scenes they are in.

The character development was by far the highlight of the film. The audience learns to love each and every one of the characters we are introduced to. None of their stories are predictable and every scene leaves us wondering what they might



do next.

The acting was truly phenomenal, Samuel L. Jackson as Jules and John Travolta as Vincent are some of the best casting choices made in film. The chemistry between the two is indescribable, the way they act together is so natural and their relationship is genuine and hilarious, making them one of the most iconic duos in film history.

In his monologues, Samuel Jackson truly delivers. He has a way with words that makes the audience become completely absorbed in the story he is trying to tell, which is what all monologues should do. Through its excellent use of storytelling and character development, *Pulp Fiction* truly is a masterpiece of film.

*Joñi Honeywell*

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### ***Gloria Bell***

(2019, dir. Sebastián Lelio)

*Gloria Bell* is a uniquely enjoyable movie that aims to capture the empty, subdued feeling of loneliness in midlife.

The chemistry between John Turturro and Julianne Moore's characters is palpable; two established and excellent actors who bring a lot of heart to their roles. They both nail it as discouraged divorcees struggling to find love in Los Angeles. The main theme is loneliness, and it's evident that the city's outwardly polished veneer is meant to disguise the heartlessness and emptiness within.

The writing and acting have within them classic tropes that are used to their best, and refurbished with a more modern context. The audience is really sold on the budding romance and conflicts between

these two would-be lovers, and Gloria's retribution for the emotional torture Arnold has put her through throughout the movie feels earned and deeply satisfying.

Director Sebastián Lelio's hazy depth-of-field adds a murky quality to the picture that is meant to symbolize the confounding nature of the characters' emotions. Moody lighting, even in the brightest shots of the movie, coupled with



color grading more inclined to colder hues, reflects the stoner-vibe and melancholy that Gloria experiences. And while the movie's soundtrack may feel like the far-reaching effect of the "Guardians of the Galaxy Syndrome," where every movie must be filled with pop-rock hits, the disco soundtrack lends to the motif of Gloria's habit of dancing, as well as her tendency to live in the past.

This movie is extremely well put together, but unfortunately doesn't hit the mark in all aspects. Gloria's children feel mostly inconsequential to the overall plot, serving as a subplot meant to texture Gloria's character. Additionally, Michael Cera (Gloria's son) has been consistently playing the same character for years, and while he is really good at that specific character, it would be great to see him be able to show more range.

*Gloria Bell* succeeds far more often than it does not, to paint a vivid picture of a lonely city and an equally lonely woman.

*Jesse Koblin*

REVIEWS (cont.)

***Five Feet Apart***

(2019, dir. Justin Baldoni)

*Five Feet Apart* is meant to jerk both the heartstrings and the wallets of a young-adult audience, carried by good acting and subject matter. The producers were on point casting Cole Sprouse for this project, as his repertoire as a teen actor is engineered to make the early teen audience swoon. The project stinks with the incense of 12-year-olds and sappy romances.

The overly-sardonic writing is a pale pastiche of what teenagers sound like, from an out-of-touch group of writers, who reprise Sprouse's edgy look and persona from Jughead in *Riverdale* without any shame. The off-base writing stretches to Stella, whose neurotic stance on medication is portrayed as the extent of her quirks; and Poe, whose entire character is centered around his sexual orientation. Overall, the movie just seems like it wants to hit all bases and do the bare minimum in the writing department, with the only inventive plot element—the cystic



fibrosis—originating from the novel. It's a shame.

Thankfully, though, the acting redeems some of the weaker elements. Haley Lu Richardson is fantastic, bringing a real sensitivity and realistic nature to her role. Cole Sprouse is also very good, despite his

character's personality and outlook being contrived.

The movie is sappy as hell, but sap can be good. This movie's success and even existence points a light on a disease that is known but not taken as seriously as it should be, or funded like it should be, and this movie is important in helping youths afflicted with this disease.

*Five Feet Apart* is an important film carried almost entirely by the good performances from Haley Lu Richardson and Cole Sprouse for a reason: without two heavy hitters at the helm, this movie is as cut-and-paste as can be imagined.

*Jesse Koblin*



***A Bronx Tale***

(1993, dir. Robert De Niro)

Based on 1960's mafia life in the Bronx, the film follows Calogero, a 9-year-old Italian-American boy who has a brief encounter with Mafia boss. After this event, Calogero finds it hard to stay away from him and soon grows up alongside him. Once he's in his teen years Calogero becomes fully immersed in the mafia life against his parents will.

Calogero's life changes in an instant as his morals are challenged after falling for an African-American girl named Jane. The antagonistic feelings towards interracial couples were at its peak in 60s New York, prompting him to question everything he had ever been taught. He must try to navigate through life and balance what he's been taught and what he feels is right.

The film mastered the vintage aspect, and the characters were able to clutch onto the hearts of the viewers. Unlike traditional love stories, *A Bronx Tale* was able to create a balance between Calogero's

character development in terms of his family and those he'd grown up next to as well as the blossoming of his forbidden relationship. The small details like the traditions made between Calogero and his father were the ones that hit viewers the hardest throughout the film as you can see that Calogero (like many teens trying to make their own way) begins to stray from them. Overall, the film is able to create a very relatable depiction of what it's like to grow up, having your morals questioned by the harsh realities of the world.

*Yhara Ozuna*

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## **Us**

(2019, dir. Jordan Peele)

*Us* is about a family on vacation gone wrong when they are attacked by clones of themselves. You will have a fun time with this movie because of how Jordan Peele was able to balance the horror with comedy.

Lupita Nyong'o was amazing, taking on the two characters who have essentially



two completely different personalities despite being the same person. Another amazing performance in the film was Winston Duke. Now on to the problems, the movie just gives you the answer in the end of the movie as to why Red attacking the family. It was not like *Get Out* where you can formulate your own theories and ideas. Despite giving you clues throughout the movie, he kind of just throws all of that way by giving us the answers to the questions like where did the clones come from and what happened that night in the carnival? Overall this movie was great and I can't wait to see what he does next.

*Brendon Field*

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## MOVIE SUMMARIES

### ***A Bronx Tale***

(1993, dir Robert De Niro)

The tale of two lovers living in the 1960s racially segregated Bronx, and their struggles to stay together despite the obstacles thrown at them. -st

### ***Dark Knight***

(2008, dir. Christopher Nolan)

One man's journey to wreak madness across the City of Gotham is interrupted by the notorious caped crusader. Heath Ledger's chilling portrayal of a classic villain revolutionizes the superhero genre while making the audience question whose side they are really on. -jh

### ***Kiki's Delivery Service***

(1989, dir. Hayao Miyazaki)

A 13-year-old witch named Kiki must undergo a traditional family ritual, by traveling to a new town for training. With its bright vivid pictures and easily followed storyline, this movie can be watched by anyone. -st

### ***Lord of the Rings:***

#### ***The Fellowship of the Ring***

(2001, dir. Peter Jackson)

The adventure tale of a group of friends and their journey to save Middle Earth. Through excellent battle shots and character development, the audience learns to find a hero in the most unlikely of places. -jh

### ***The Butterfly Effect***

(2004, dir. Eric Bess)

Man has the power to go back in time and changes the future. Good acting but bad use to effects. -ss

### ***Avengers: Endgame***

(2019, dirs. Joe and Anthony Russo)

The final installment of the beloved superhero franchise explores the aftermath of the destructive Thanos snap as Earth's mightiest heroes attempt to correct their own failures. The audience is given everything they asked for, an epic rematch, classic witty marvel humor, and a conclusion that is both heartbreaking and satisfactory. The perfect way for the Avengers to assemble one last time. -jh

### ***My Neighbor Totoro***

(1989, dir. Hayao Miyazaki)

Visually pleasing and emotional story of two sisters who encounter a magical creature when moving into a new house. -ipz

### ***Little***

(2019, dir. Tina Gordon)

A modern twist to the classic movie Big, a mean overly judgemental boss is mysteriously transformed into her smaller self after a magical encounter. Issa Rae's natural comedic charm adds an original touch to an otherwise unoriginal concept. A good movie for when you don't want to think so much. -jh

***La La Land***

(2016, dir. Damien Chazelle)

Beautifully shot cinematography, amazing use of colors and soundtrack, academy award winning film about a love story of a couple who couldn't be due to the result of chasing dreams. Featuring Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone in the leading roles. -ss

***The Departed***

(2006, dir. Martin Scorsese)

An officer (Leonardo DiCaprio) must go undercover in order to infiltrate a dangerous gang. Struggling between getting caught and blending in with this new world, the film takes us on a thrilling and suspenseful ride. -st

***Howl's Moving Castle***

(2004, dir. Hayao Miyazaki)

Anime style movie following a young lady who gets cursed by a witch and her adventurous journey of becoming young again. -ss

***Styx***

(2019, dir. Wolfgang Fischer)

Set around Rike, a doctor who sails to a long awaited vacation spot. After a massive storm, we're introduced to a slowly sinking ship, yards away with survivors calling out for help. Coming from a character whose career revolves around helping others, it isn't a surprise that she would do anything to try and help, even if it means risking her own safety. -st

***Not One Less***

(1999, dir. Zhang Yimou)

This film demonstrates the hardships of living in a rural area. The film shows a life-changing journey that changes a 13-year-old girl, solely through their point of view, and shows how much other people have an effect on them, and shows the growth a character has had. -le

***Lady Bird***

(2017, dir. Greta Gerwig)

A heartwarming tale of a senior in Sacramento during her last year high school as she deals with various relationships, specifically the one with her mother. Touching and hilarious, Greta Gerwig brings a fresh voice to the classic adolescent movie genre. -jh





CONTRIBUTORS:

Joñi Honeywell, Lizzy Estrada, A'Janae Curtis,  
Yhara Ozuna, Sewayne Thompson, Brendon Field,  
Shamil Santos, Isaac Platt Zolov, Jesse Koblin

