

Madeleine Salman

[msalman@bu.edu](mailto:msalman@bu.edu)

Reading between the lines on *Booksmart*

What do you get when you combine two high strung high schoolers, one crushing revelation, and four years of missing out? You get this summer's best comedy. *Book smart* follows two best friends, Molly and Amy, on their last day of senior year as they realize their years of hard work to get into top colleges were for naught because their party-animal classmates got accepted to the same schools. The next 90 minutes follows the duo as they party hop around Los Angeles trying to make up for lost time. Olivia Wilde's directorial debut has all the sincerity of coming of age stories like *Lady Bird* but sports the relentless screwball slapstick of cult classics like *Superbad*.

The centerpiece of the film is the friendship between Molly (Beanie Feldstein) and Amy (Kaitlyn Denver). Molly is the typical precocious outspoken overachiever. She is a class president and valedictorian, whose plans to attend Yale are only the first step in her master plan to become the youngest ever supreme court judge. Amy is the introverted ying to Molly's extroverted yang. Amy is a Columbia bound book worm turned social justice warrior who will spend a gap year in Botswana teaching women to make their own tampons. The contrast between the two characters makes their friendship fresh while staying faithful to the nerdy buddy comedy subgenre.

When put together, Molly and Amy are an unstoppable comedy duo reminiscent of Lucy and Ethel (or a sober version of Abby and Iyanna). Throughout the film their relationship is expressed by one-up style compliment battles, matching jumpsuit ensembles, and an unbreakable vow named after Malala Yousafzai. At some points in the film, their dialogue reads as campy or trying too hard to relate to the teenage target audience. But this is saved by Feldstein and Denver's innate understanding of each other's comedic strengths. Their ability to effortlessly riff off each other makes their on-screen friendship both believable and irresistibly funny. I often found myself giggling during the set up, and full on cackling as the two tumbled through each raucously awkward punchline.

Molly and Amy find also themselves in great company. Their classmates are a colorful and outrageous take on traditional high school character tropes that are older than John Hughes himself. The rich queen bee, Gigi (played by the dazzling Billie Lourd) is initially a ditzy, pill popping, trust fund baby who takes advantage of her gullible and even richer sidekick, Jared (Skylar Grisondo). As the story unfolds, Gigi is revealed as an astute observer who would do anything for her friends. Nick (Mason Gooding), the slow-witted popular jock, is actually a Harry Potter superfan and is heading to Georgetown. Theo (Eduardo Franco) - the stoner burnout who repeated the seventh grade - got a six-figure job coding at google. In each case, the character is written as a complex but tangible version of the classic “freaks and geeks” we all know and love.

*Booksmart* is best known for flamboyantly subverting traditional teen movie tropes, but the real power of the film lies in its subtleties. The depiction of Molly and Amy’s classmates as high achieving self-absorbed bullies is shattered by the small kindnesses they extend towards our protagonists. They give Molly a ride home, commend Amy on her decision to go to Botswana, and welcome both at their parties. Within quiet moments and small gestures made out of genuine earnest, Olivia Wilde pulls back to curtain on what high school really is. Though its ridiculous and messy, high school is about real people struggling to grow up together.

The subtle yet impactful creative choices also extend to the film’s visuals. *Booksmart* uses cinematography to comment on the teenage experience in 2019. The clips showing the parties that Molly and Amy are trying to get invited to were shot on a handheld camera to mimic the look of Snapchat and Instagram stories. The elegance of this approach is that clips are free from the loud visual effects or overlays that similar films use to represent social media. This detail is quiet but effective filmmaking at its best. The use of the selfie cam is a nod to the constant posting, exhibitionism, and FOMO that contemporary teenagers have grown up with. Like many others, Molly and Amy’s understanding of the people around them is filtered through a front facing camera. *Booksmart* is making a statement on how ridiculous and damaging social media has become. Making it one of the most faithful depictions of teenage culture to appear on film in the last decade (perhaps second only to Greta Gerwig’s *Ladybird*).

Ultimately, the attention to detail is what drives the film to exceeding all expectations for a teen movie. Olivia Wilde's *Booksmart* is an indie film carefully concealed within a comedy. When you pull off its Gaucho Marks glasses, you are confronted by a timely and poignant coming of age story.