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Movie Review: *Lady Bird*, a Winning First Film from Greta Gerwig, Is Alert to Class but Falters on Race

Posted by [Laura Jaramillo](#) on Thu, Nov 16, 2017 at 11:01 AM



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Saoirse Ronan and Laurie Metcalf in Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*

Lady Bird

★★★

Opening Friday, Nov. 17

In many ways, *Lady Bird* is a winning directorial debut by Greta Gerwig, who also wrote the film. It captures the fuzzy nostalgia as well as the pains of coming of age at the start of the twenty-first century, as the Iraq War blares through the television in the background of a bustling Catholic family's life. Saoirse Ronan plays the title character, a slightly rebellious Sacramento teen battling for autonomy with her financially struggling, overwhelmed nurse mother, Marion (Laurie Metcalf). But for all of *Lady Bird*'s blurred lucidity, its anxieties about race and the new economy are where the film falters.

Lady Bird reconstructs the ambient feeling of the early 2000s to such a degree that it will be hard for any woman who grew up in the late nineties, at the dawn of the commercial internet, to resist. There's Ronan's eclectic but not quite successful punk style, the limited scope and problems of teenage life before cell phones, and the period's terrible popular music, used to very tender effect throughout the soundtrack. Sam Levy's digital cinematography captures the grainy visual style of the last days of color analog photography, as if the whole film had been shot on a disposable point-and-shoot. Light blurs the characters' silhouettes in suburban living-room windows, casting a quaint haze over everything.

The teenage ensemble cast is absolutely delightful, from *Lady Bird*'s awkward theater-kid best friend, Julie (Beanie Feldstein), to her closeted first kiss, Danny (Lucas Hedges), and her diffident cool-guy crush, Kyle (Timothée Chalmet). These actors portray all the ambivalence, love, and jealousy of high school without ever lapsing into empty archetypes. Ronan is unfailingly sympathetic and complex, if often bratty and willful.

In past few years, American cinema has relaxed its taboo against discussing class. With directors such as Andrea Arnold, Barry Jenkins, and Sean Baker enjoying some mainstream success, characters and stories once considered too marginal for Hollywood are gracing screens with their grit. This turn towards economic realism is very much apparent in *Lady Bird*. The specter of a failing economy and declining middle-class prosperity haunts the film in the forms of refinanced houses, ugly sedans, and unaffordable college tuition.

But these savvy hints at economic stagnation also seem to conceal subtle anti-immigrant sentiments. Miguel and Shelley, a Latinx couple taken in by Marion, are mostly affable tokens who barely intersect with the film's main narrative, except when a looming economic crisis comes into play. When Lady Bird fails to get into UC Berkeley and Miguel (Jordan Rodrigues) does, she yells at him, saying that he only got in because he's Hispanic and that he'll never get a job with so many piercings in his face.

Later, Miguel removes all his piercings and wins out over Lady Bird's father, Larry, for a computer-programming job. But these moments pass quickly, as background snippets in the larger story of Lady Bird's ego development. Gerwig deploys these tropes with a kind of "isn't racism horrible!" knowingness, but the failure to endow Miguel and Shelley with psychological complexity ends up reaffirming the only non-white characters in the movie as vaguely threatening and unknowable.

Lady Bird is surefooted and smart, but the question of who is cast in the film's soft, flattering nostalgia and who isn't should not be swept under the rug.

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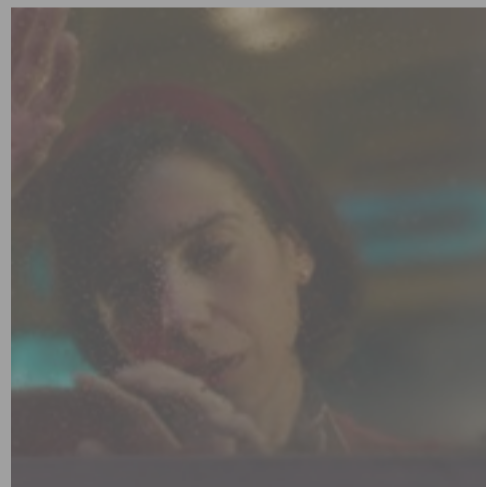
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