

Screen, Screen Reviews

Review: Booksmart

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes is enamoured by the anarchic charms of Olivia Wilde's coming-of-age film.

5 mins read

Written by [& Jacob Heayes](#) | May 16, 2019

There's fewer things more satisfying in film than a successful underdog story. Perhaps that's why I've fallen so head over heels for *Booksmart* in the days following my first viewing (of many more to come, I'm sure). It's the little film that could. The directorial debut of actress Olivia Wilde and starring Kaitlyn Dever and Beanie Feldstein, two actresses typically confined to supporting roles, *Booksmart* is a brilliantly charming coming-of-age film that soars past its genre predecessors with equal grace and gleeful anarchy.

Set during that familiar period of the last week before high school graduation, Dever and Feldstein play best friends Amy and Molly who have largely floated unnoticed through the entirety of their semester, focusing on studying over typically raucous partying. Their plan is thankfully successful – that is, until the earth-shattering revelation that the popular students who partied *also* got into the elite colleges too. With this information in mind, the two set out to finally attend the party of their dreams and prove that yes, they can have fun. A straightforward but achingly empathetic narrative combining the worst of FOMO and the best of friendship, *Booksmart* is a tightly-written and perfectly paced trip through a myriad of bizarre celebrations and unpredictable student rituals. Much like how *Superbad* defined itself on the simple rule of “get alcohol”, *Booksmart* is solely about “getting to the party” and this approach arguably elevates it even higher than that former once-classic of the genre. Not only is it consistently eye-wateringly hilarious to an extent that fewer comedies have managed this decade, but it has serious emotional weight. Its final act builds to a poignant climax that

conveys a genuinely beautiful message about self-acceptance, one that I feel our generation needs to hear and embody more than ever.

“The uniformly excellent cast only heightens a film that is already feverishly quotable and affectionate”

As sharp as the script is, it would be meaningless if the performances failed to capture its quirky range of characters. Thankfully, every single one shines. Dever and Feldstein slip into the lead roles effortlessly and I only came away wanting to see more from them. Their chemistry feels authentic and their delivery is rarely anything less than perfect. Their energetic, electric performances in every single scene carry this film and most importantly, ensure that you actually care for these characters. The film demands both understated and manic moments yet the duo deliver both with ease. The supporting cast is just as appealing with Billie Lourd and Skyler Gisondo standing out as particularly memorable. Lourd’s performance as Gigi encapsulates the film’s more absurdist elements as she impossibly follows Amy and Molly from party to party, establishing herself with often hilarious antics wherever she goes. On the other hand, Gisondo’s Jared is a student who no-one seems to notice with his increasingly bombastic popularity schemes only growing in spectacle and insanity. The uniformly excellent cast only heightens a film that is already feverishly quotable and affectionate.

“It’s another victory not only for an industry starved of fresh perspectives, but for a genre typically defined by problematic female characters and repetitive thematic tropes”

With every high-school film comes an equally fitting soundtrack, one that has the responsibility of defining these characters and the spirit of the year. *Booksmart* has set a new standard boasting a lively playlist ranging from pop to punk packed with enough ear-worms and classic tunes to almost convince you of leaving the cinema and going home just to dance along. With a mix of Death Grips and the iconic guitar riff from DJ Shadow and Run the Jewels’ “Nobody Speak”, the soundtrack will likely go down as one of the year’s best, perfectly embodying the carefree spirit of the film. Wilde similarly proves herself as an accomplished director, understanding when to let the film breathe and when to let the actors riff away to their heart’s content. It’s another victory not only for an industry starved of fresh perspectives, but for a genre typically defined by problematic female characters and repetitive thematic tropes. *Booksmart* is fresh, fiery and very, very funny.

■