

Lady Bird (2017)

A Glorious Coming-of-Age Feature from First-Time Solo Director Greta Gerwig

★★★★

By Dan Wright

The coming-of-age story is often dominated by raucous set-pieces, overstated questions of the 'self,' heightened sexual emotion, contagious rebelliousness and fractured adolescent friendships; this is why it is so surprising to find Greta Gerwig's solo directorial debut, *Lady Bird*, is instead bursting with a different theme: its unrepentant feminism.

The film takes us back to 2002 and follows Christine (Saoirse Ronan) who, dissatisfied with her birth name, has taken the title 'Lady Bird.' Not only discontent with her name, she wants more from life in general; she dreams of leaving Sacramento in search of living 'where culture is' at an expensive arts college in post-9/11 New York. Her grades and family finances, however, mean that this is a slim possibility for the family who 'live on the wrong side of the tracks.'

Saoirse Ronan excels in the lead role, as do members of the supporting cast: Laurie Metcalf, Tracy Letts, Lucas Hedges, Timothee Chalamet, and Beanie Feldstein. But what makes this film such a sensation is how understated it feels. The screenplay is flawless, scattered with both funny and heart-churning moments.

Every shot oozes a delicate touch from Gerwig, which allows the film to display the self-determined journey of its lead character with succinct softness.

Lady Bird does contain similar tropes to other coming-of-age films, but deals with them in different and recalibrated ways. *Lady Bird* has two love interests: Danny, who she meets through the creative performance group at school and is the first person she confesses her love to. They seem inseparable until she catches him in a toilet cubicle with another boy, leading to their breakup. Danny is followed by Kyle – a self-aware, self-styled rebel, who sits on car bonnets, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes and criticising the economy. *Lady Bird* sees through this persona, and later tires of it. Not until, though, she learns that Kyle has lied in order to sleep with her. This section of the film, often the pinnacle plot point in other films, is as understated as the rest of the feature.

Lady Bird's virginity is not a symbol of her, and is not something that she structures her identity, or her life, around.

Another way that the film differs from others in this genre is through the display of motherhood. *Lady Bird* constantly clashes and bickers with her mother in a way that will be relatable to most parents and their children. Neither is emotionally available but, when Danny asks *Lady Bird* for comfort as he comes to terms with his sexuality, *Lady Bird* finally lets somebody in. Instead of turning her ex-boyfriend away, *Lady Bird* holds him tight, reassuring him that it will be okay. This is a scene that mirrors the relationship between *Lady Bird*'s parents, as unbeknownst to her, her father is suffering with depression. The display of compassion and forgiveness from *Lady Bird* encapsulates a character who, despite her gritted determination to 'live through something' and her admirable right to exist, demonstrates that she still has both feet firmly on the floor.

It is easy to see why this film received plenty of award recognition, most notably from the Academy, where it was nominated for five Oscars.

This is only a glimpse of the bigger story, though, for a film that contains so many feminist traits and could even be considered as the first *real* feminist coming-of-age film.

It is almost poetic that Greta Gerwig received an Oscar nomination for the Best Director category. But, in ninety years of Academy awards this was only the fifth time that a female director has even been nominated. Which, despite this excellent film being an example of the many changes being seen in modern society, it is clear that there is still work to be done.

