

Star-crossed: Love, death, and adolescence in two films

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The Fault in Our Stars

Starring Shailene Woodley, Ansel Elgort, Laura Dern, Sam Trammell, Willem Dafoe.

Directed by Josh Boone. Film Release June 2014; DVD Release September 2014.

Rated PG 13. Running time 133 minutes.

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl

Starring Thomas Mann, Olivia Cooke, RJ Cyler, Connie Britton, Nick Offerman, Molly Shannon.

Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Regon. Film Release June 2015; DVD Release October 2015.

Rated PG 13. Running time 106 minutes.

O, here/ Will I set up my everlasting rest,/ And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars/From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last!/Arms, take your last embrace! and, lips, O you/The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss.

—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Is there any subject so exquisitely wonderful and terrible than the complications of young love, especially when that love is threatened by feuding families, rival gangs or serious illness?

Every year, English teachers count on their students' fascination with, and empathy for, ill-fated romance by

assigning *Romeo and Juliet* to 93 percent of all ninth-graders in American high schools.¹ In addition, Hollywood continues to build its catalogue of teen cancer dramas, most notably in the last decade with titles such as *My Life Without Me* (2003); *Keith* (2008); *Restless* (2011); and *Now Is Good* (2014).

Two recent films also take on the agony and ecstasy of love, death and adolescence: *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*. Each features teen characters either living with, or bearing witness to, terminal disease. Each attempts to transcend—even mock—the tried-and-true conventions and self-indulgent sentimentality of the genre. However, one is much more successful in moving beyond the formulaic tear-jerker and giving us an illness narrative that is neither too mawkish nor platitudinous.

The Fault in Our Stars

Hazel Grace Lancaster (Shailene Woodley) is a 16-year-old cancer patient who meets and falls in love with Augustus “Gus” Waters (Ansel Elgort), a similarly stricken teen. They instantly connect at a youth support group that Hazel reluctantly attends to placate her concerned mother (Laura Dern). The film is based on the bestselling novel of the same name by John Green.

Since her initial diagnosis of thyroid cancer at age 13, followed by metastases to the lungs, Hazel has had her share of near misses—she nearly died from pneumonia—to near miracles, such as a last-ditch experimental drug that is actually working.

With tubes in her nose and oxygen tank in tow, she now faces reality with an acerbic wit and a mature resolve to avoid any pretense or pity: “I’m a grenade,” she warns Gus, as he makes a move towards intimacy. However, Gus is both irresistible and tenacious, wooing Hazel with his own brand of self-deprecating humor (he has lost a leg to osteosarcoma), and charming originality.

The critical response to the film has largely focused on its tone, with many reviewers agreeing that its gallows humor, lively dialogue, and authentic performances save it from becoming teen-flick maudlin.

At one point, Hazel's father (Sam Trammell) proudly notes that the Lancasters, "are not sentimental people," a statement that might be a rallying cry for what the film is aspiring not to be.

The film also cannily thwarts any temptation towards cynicism in viewers with the introduction of a reclusive and alcoholic author, Peter Van Houten (Willem Dafoe), whose one book is Hazel's all-time favorite novel, *An Imperial Affliction*. The novel not only provides a literary analogue to the film—it is the author's story of his own young daughter's illness and subsequent death from cancer—but also serves as somewhat clumsy plot device.

Meeting Van Houten is Hazel's fondest wish, and when Gus is able to arrange a visit to Amsterdam where the author lives, she comes prepared with a list of questions about the narrative, which mysteriously ends in mid-sentence. Van Houten's lack of compassion for her condition—"You are a failed experiment in mutation," he sneers—as well as his contempt for her quest to find meaning, crystallizes a major theme of the film: because there just is no making sense of such an affliction in someone so young, life—including love and pain—can and must be experienced even for a fleeting moment. What Hazel will later call a "little infinity."

If viewers are still not getting the message, the young couple's subsequent visit to Anne Frank's attic and their first kiss upon hearing words from her diary—"Think of all the beauty in everything around you, and be happy"—will put a lump in their throats and bring tears to their eyes.

It's the scene that divides critics between those who applaud the romantic sweetness of the film, acknowledging its success in making viewers laugh and cry, with those who bristle at its strict adherence to narrative convention and emotional manipulation. The film, however, is more sophisticated than that, as it subtly calls attention to the challenges of telling the story without reverting to formula, or provoking sobs.

At the beginning of the film, Hazel herself dismisses the sentimentality of what she calls the "cancer genre," but by the end, she recognizes that sometimes banality is all we have left.

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl

Written by Jesse Andrews and based on his novel of the same name, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* premiered at



Shailene Woodley and Ansel Elgort star in *The Fault in Our Stars*. © Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

the 2015 Sundance Film Festival and won its Grand Jury Prize. The critical response was overwhelmingly positive with praise for the performances of the young actors playing Greg (Thomas Mann), Earl (RJ Cyler) and Rachel (Olivia Cooke), the dying girl.

Similar to *The Fault in Our Stars*, a well-intentioned mother (Connie Britton) is the catalyst for a relationship between her son, Greg, and classmate, Rachel, who has been recently diagnosed with leukemia. Greg eschews any and all emotional and social connections, even describing Earl whom he has known since elementary school as a "co-worker."

Greg's goal as he ends his high-school experience is to continue a policy of isolationism in which he maintains diplomatic ties with all cliques but has no real alliances with anyone. Thus, it is especially awkward when Greg is forced by his mother to visit Rachel because she has cancer (she is similarly appalled by his obligatory pity call), but it becomes even more discomfiting for him when they develop a genuine friendship.



Me and Earl and the Dying Girl with Olivia Cooke and Thomas Mann. © Fox Searchlight Pictures/Photofest

Through voice-over narration, Greg can both openly express his insecurities and slyly undercut expectations that the plot will take a turn towards the conventional teen romance. More than once, he explicitly warns viewers that he and Rachel will not lock eyes, declare their love and fall into each other's arms.

Greg has been able to foster and maintain his distance, if not indifference, from others because he is a filmmaker—his default position is behind a camera, peering at life and arranging its props and characters. He and Earl have an entire oeuvre of short parodies such as “Pooping Tom,” “A Sockwork Orange,” and “Senior Citizen Kane.” When Greg finally finds the courage to show them to Rachel, she appreciates them, taking pleasure and finding respite in their goofy absurdity from the all-too-real, all-too-debilitating treatment for cancer. In fact, it is Rachel's own subtle quirkiness and discriminating eye that disallow any aura of tragic romanticism to diminish the character.

Greg wrestles with the almost impossible challenge of producing a film about Rachel's illness: “I have no idea how to tell the story. I don't even know how to start it.”

He and Earl record and reject every cliché (“Stay strong, Rachel!”) and convention of the cancer script. The film that Greg ultimately makes for Rachel is more akin to Ingmar Bergman's experimental masterpiece, *Cries and Whispers*, than the quintessential 1970 tear-jerker, *Love*

Story (both of which feature beautiful females dying from cancer). After years of making silly jokes, Greg creates something authentic, if incomplete.

Both movies recall Lorrie Moore's darkly funny story, *People Like That Are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk*. When the narrator—a novelist—learns that her child has a potentially fatal malignancy, she discovers that it is impossible to write the experience, that life is simply unsayable.²

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl is more successful than *The Fault in Our Stars* in its attempt to say the unsayable without resorting to melodrama, but both films call attention to the centrality of storytelling in response to serious illness and the human impulse to create coherence and make meaning in situations that are simply incomprehensible.

References

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