

# I'm Sorry I'm Not Perfect

BY OLIVIA FUNDERBURG

I'm very different from Christine McPherson—or as she'd rather be called, Lady Bird. But Lady Bird's family is strikingly similar to my own. She lives with both her parents; her mom is set in her ways and her dad is more relaxed. She has one brother—though older than my own—whose girlfriend lives with her family.

In the same breath as Lady Bird says her mom Marion “is always mad,” she says, “she loves me a lot.” This sums up so much of my relationship with my mom as I've gotten older: two intense emotions that shouldn't go together but often do. “Always mad” is of course an exaggeration, but the sentiment feels like it's true when said out loud. Greta Gerwig's depiction of a mother-daughter relationship is so poignant because it's so complicated. Lady Bird is relatively close with her mom, but they don't get along all the time; Marion wants the best for her, but they don't always agree on what that is.

Lady Bird feels compelled to ask her mother if she likes her. I know my mom

likes me, but I don't know if she always likes exactly who I am or how I do things. I don't always know if I'm living up to her expectations. Marion explains that she doesn't not like her daughter, she just wants her to be the best version of herself she can be. My mom hasn't said this to me, but my dad recently told me that he sees this quality of hers—the desire to help others improve themselves—reflected in me and how I talk about the world.

As far as artistry goes, Greta Gerwig certainly deserves high praise. Her work is beautiful and complicated. Saoirse Ronan deserves perhaps even higher praise. Lady Bird soars because of her performance. There are a few moments where Lady Bird feels something so intensely that she can't contain herself and she just screams. I know exactly what that feels like. She's in tears as she apologizes profusely to her mother in their kitchen—but what the hell does she have to be sorry for? She grapples with friendships and romantic relationships and various firsts; film offers a story that stays close to the ground and

feels real because of this. It's only as good as it is because of Ronan's efforts in it.

Overall, I was left with a burning question: what if Lady Bird had really pushed boundaries? What if the film took its mother-daughter story and complicated it?

Why doesn't Lady Bird talk about race? Lady Bird's adopted brother is Latino (even though he's played by an actor of Malaysian descent, but that's a different conversation), and his race is almost never addressed, besides in one heated conversation. After Lady Bird gets rejected from a college, she says it must have been easier for him to get accepted as a person of color. Meanwhile, he didn't put his race on his application. Miguel's girlfriend is black; she almost never talks and goes relatively unnoticed by Lady Bird, whose egocentrism is typical of a teenager. A school guidance counselor is also black, as is a school priest, but Lady Bird's classmates are strikingly white. Maybe this is an accurate depiction of early 2000s California.

Images: Lady Bird dir. Greta Gerwig



## ARTS & CULTURE

Why doesn't Lady Bird talk about sexuality? Lady Bird starts dating a classmate but discovers him making out with another guy. He can't come out yet and pleads with her to keep his secret. She does, and this is yet another sideline plot. The story follows Lady Bird as she leaves theater and her best friend behind for what she thinks are bigger and better things. Greta Gerwig offers a keen understanding of what it's like to be a teenage girl and not quite know who you are yet; even though it's not an autobiographical film, its truths speak to her adolescence.

I think where Lady Bird's intrigue falls short is that not very much separates Lady Bird from her mother. Both women are white, and both live in the same financial situation, so their main source of tension is a clashing of ideas and attitudes. Though this tension can be powerful, their differences are never fully explained. I want to know more: what does Marion think when she doesn't say goodbye to her daughter at the airport, and why is Lady Bird's father such an important figure in her life? Lady Bird leaves gaps—yes, this leaves the audience thinking, but this also means that the film plays it really safe.

What if Lady Bird's mother was white, and she was not? My relationship with my mother is fraught in part because it's difficult for her to grapple with my growing up and becoming my own person, and in part because of the stress that money brought on our family over the past year—but also because race separates us.

My mother is white, and I'm black. This fact complicates our relationship in ways I can hardly begin to explain. She understands the complications even less, or at least it seems that way. She doesn't understand all the complexities of race because she's not obligated to like I am, and probably because she doesn't want to—acknowledging how race makes us irrevocably different means acknowledging that there are certain things she will never



fully understand about me.

The most interesting thing about Lady Bird was how it examined class, place, and how they related to identity. As a coming-of-age film, it succeeds. As a film about a mother and daughter, it could be even better. As a work of art created by and starring a woman, I hope it opens doors for other artists to tell their stories and explore their truths. A story that really interrogates race or sexuality probably isn't Greta Gerwig's story to tell.

The universality of Lady Bird's emotional story is incredible in its simplistic beauty and deserves recognition. What does it mean that I could relate so strongly to the main character in Lady Bird when in many ways she's nothing like me? Where she's a white girl from Sacramento, I'm a black girl from small town Massachusetts. She went to Catholic school, I went to public school. I came to a college pretty close to home, and she couldn't wait to get far away—this is one lesson I can learn from Lady Bird (or Christine, as she ultimately decides to be), that I shouldn't be afraid to take a big leap. But while we recognize this film, we also have to ask whose stories are missing. Who has yet to be given space to ask the questions that Greta Gerwig asks, or doesn't, on the big screen? Does the success of her film create space for others to come after her?

I say to myself all the time what Christine says to her mom: "I'm sorry I'm not perfect."

I am sorry I'm not perfect, but I'm also sorry that I feel like I have to be. I hope Saoirse Ronan's angry and complicated and wonderful Lady Bird will help someone else understand that they don't have to be either.

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