

I saw the teen comedies of my generation, but they didn't see me. Then came 'Easy A.'

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The first time I saw “Easy A,” I was 13 and insecure.

It was 2010. High school was imminent. I wasn't particularly interested in a movie adapted from Nathaniel Hawthorne's “The Scarlet Letter,” which I'd pronounced a “snoozefest from the 1800s” (an actual line from my high school journal).

Plus, the “Easy A” trailer had not seemed promising. It advertised the story of a high school girl — misunderstood, quirky and deeply cynical about even being in high school — who would go through adolescent strife and ultimately be accepted, even embraced, by her peers. (So, also a snoozefest.)

But I was convinced by my best friend to go see it, and it turned out to be the first of many viewings of the comedy directed by Will Gluck from a screenplay by Bert V. Royal.

I remember grumbling through the movie's title sequence — my Pennsylvania-raised bitterness fueled swipes at how “unfortunate” she was to live in eternally sunny California — watching the camera pan from expansive, sun-dappled vineyards to a crowded quad as Emma Stone's husky, wise-beyond-her-years voice settled over the scene. “The rumors of my promiscuity have been greatly exaggerated,” she proclaimed. Then: “Don't worry — this isn't one of those tales.”

Her tone was blasé. Cocky, even. Until then, there weren't many American coming-of-age movie protagonists with that level of assured self-awareness (especially about sex) from the get-go.

My main references were the male characters in 2007's “Superbad,” in which Stone had played the supporting role of Jonah Hill's love interest. Hill and Michael Cera played two friends determined to not be virgins and to make sexist jokes that aged poorly. And though I saw myself in Ellen Page's quirky title character in another 2007 film, “Juno,” the plot still revolved around teen pregnancy and adult decisions that I didn't find relatable.

But “Easy A” was obsessed with everyone else's virginity obsession, subverting sex-crazed tropes into a sharp, thoughtful film. Packed with references to “Say Anything” and other '80s homages, the film felt refreshing against the steady churn of bildungsroman narratives that often centered on young men. I openly scoffed at the era of early Hill and Cera movies because I couldn't relate to socially awkward White boys simultaneously chasing girls and making lewd, sexist jokes.

I loved “Easy A” because of Stone's Olive Penderghast.

Olive was complex in ways that were otherwise lacking in my consumption of teenage characters on screen. She was

cool, confident, funny and worthy of admiration. Outwardly embracing a manufactured “slutty” persona, she was inwardly confident enough to not be pressured into sex, or let it define her worth. Her character soothed a persistent worry that I would have to move faster with my sexuality than I felt comfortable with, to fit in with my peers.

“Easy A” follows Olive after she lies to her best friend Rhiannon (Aly Michalka of *Aly & AJ* fame) about losing her virginity, a rumor that snakes its way through the school. She revels in the newfound attention, almost giddy with being known for *something* in high school. In afternoon detention, she confides in a bullied gay peer, Brandon (Dan Byrd), about the lie. Together, they concoct an almost Shakespearean scene: The two will fake having sex to elevate their social standing.

“You want to maintain this floozy facade, I don’t want to get pushed into things every day; it’s a win-win,” he pleads with her. Olive and Brandon’s fake hookup acts as social protection. For Brandon, it means being able to attend school without the constant fear of homophobic bullies. And Olive gets to own her new reputation, which she does by boldly embroidering a scarlet A on all her clothes and strutting into school with a saucier wardrobe and an indifferent attitude.

I saw it as a move of epic feminist proportions. And what I saw just as clearly was, sex sells.

The film’s structure zooms out of the teenage narrative to a slightly more grown-up Olive, who cleverly advertises a webcast where she turns the story of her life into social media gold. Of course, it helps when you have the world’s coolest, most sex-positive parents to advise you — Olive’s are played by Patricia Clarkson and Stanley Tucci (and Stanley Tucci’s much talked-about forearms).

I realized during a recent rewatch that “Easy A” has been a blueprint for many subsequent coming-of-age films. Its influence is found in films like “Eighth Grade” and “Lady Bird,” which see sex through a more refined lens: There’s less hyper-fixation on making sure you’re doing it, and more about what it *means* to be doing it.

When “Easy A” recently defeated “Lady Bird” in the Ringer’s Teen Movie Bracket faceoff of genre favorites, the surprise win was seen by some as confirmation that Olive’s adventures belonged in the company of such beloved classics as “Clueless” and “Mean Girls.” As the website’s vote tabulators were forced to note: “ ‘Easy A’ has sneaked into that elite group, and it might be time to start taking this movie more seriously.”

“Easy A” is not perfect. Some parts of the film haven’t aged well at all, including repeated use of an offensive, homophobic term. (And I won’t even get into all the weird Huckleberry Finn references.) But in the 2010s, when I couldn’t grow up with more evolved releases like “The Half of It” or “To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before” — recent movies with protagonists that looked and sounded like me, with unexpectedly wholesome romances — at least I had one “Easy A.”

