

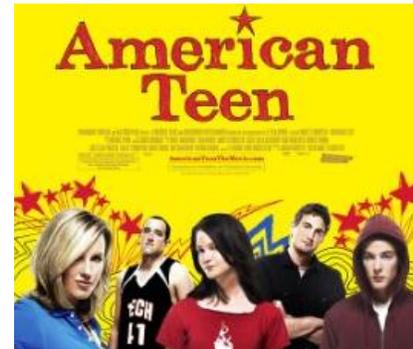
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“American Teen” — Not a Pretty Picture

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Nanette Burstein’s *American Teen* documentary has hit the big screen with a limited release in major American cities. The film purports to be a realistic view of American adolescence, as Burstein went to Warsaw, Indiana in order to follow five teenagers through their senior year in high school. Parents who see the film will wonder if the documentary is as realistic as Burstein claims — but they will worry that it is true.

American Teen won the Best Directing award for Burstein at the Sundance Film Festival, where the documentary was enthusiastically received. The big question now is whether the public will pay theater prices to see a film about what goes on at the local high school. Time will tell. In the meantime, the film is attracting controversy.



Burstein focuses on five high school seniors and, even as she insists that she did not play into stereotypes, the film’s Web site advertises the central characters as “the jock,” “the geek,” “the rebel,” “the princess,” and “the heartthrob.” Forgive me, but those seem to be the most stereotypical stereotypes of American adolescence.

The documentary is situated in rural America. Warsaw, Indiana is located just over a hundred miles outside of Chicago, which means that the town is hardly isolated. Nevertheless, the social context of the Warsaw Community High school seems realistic and recognizable — but not at all reassuring.

Adolescent angst is the standard fare of coming-of-age stories and a staple of literature, drama, and film. From *Romeo and Juliet* and *Catcher in the Rye* to *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Rumspinga*, and *Lord of the Flies*, the insecurities, brutalities, and extremes of adolescent life have been on full display. Over the past several decades, adolescent psychologists have supplied the concept of the identity crisis as the therapeutic framework for expecting teenagers to misbehave. *American Teen* follows in this tradition. The general idea is that adolescent *Sturm und Drang* is just to be expected. Parents and other adults are to just “deal with it” and remember their own adolescent struggles.

The kids in *American Teen* do not come off well. Some, such as Megan (“the Princess”), are absolutely unlikeable. She is the rich kid of privilege who is spoiled, narcissistic, and ruthless. Once her parents are introduced, all is explained. When she is caught vandalizing a boy’s home and is found guilty of sexual harassment her biggest worry is that she will not get into Notre Dame (she does). She explains that she has forgiven herself and her father suggests that her real problem was being stupid enough to get caught. Both belong on *Oprah*.

Jake (“the Geek”), is probably the most likeable teenager in the film, and he is almost surely the most authentic — if simply because he is trapped within the identity that earned him the part. He, along with Hannah (“the Rebel”), brings nihilism to life. But, in his case at least, it is a rather happy and inconsistent nihilism — the kind that marks the lives of so many American teens. Hannah, like Megan, is largely explained by her parents. She lives with neither parent, but with her elderly grandmother. Her mother is manic depressive and her father appears to be peripheral to her life. She wants to be remembered after she is dead, and hopes for a career in film. Jake, meanwhile, holds to a dream of protean transformation, confiding with the camera that he might turn into “Mr. Muscle” in college. The audience at the screening I attended laughed loudest at this point. Burstein clearly intended to use his hope as a laugh line.

Colin ("the Jock") is another of the more honest characters. His father, an Elvis impersonator, cannot pay for Colin to attend college and warns him that his only hope is a basketball scholarship. It's that or the Army, dad insists. Colin is the leading player on the Warsaw team, but he is selfish in hogging shots and hits a slump in his shooting. He finds athletic redemption (and earns a scholarship) when he learns to be less selfish and finds his groove once again. All Warsaw celebrates — a reminder of the central role of high school athletics in small-town America. In Indiana, that means basketball.

Mitch ("the Heartthrob") is a bright and winsome character, but he dumps Hannah as his girlfriend with a text message. In the epilogue at the end of the movie, Mitch admits that he would never do that trick again, but the audience may wonder if he has really learned anything. He appears to glide through life with little worry and even less seriousness. Nevertheless, his aim is medical school.

Critics have questioned the authenticity of the film. Burstein defends her movie as an accurate and non-manipulated view of adolescent life but, as some reviewers have pointed out, she seems to have her camera on both parties in strategic phone conversations at just the right time. How can that happen by accident?

American Teen is not a remake of *American Pie* as a documentary. Burstein does not take her camera into the bedrooms of these teenagers nor does she depict them having sex. What the film does, however, is inform parents of the ruthlessly crude view of sex that pervades so much adolescent life. A girl sends a nude photo of herself by text message and then receives a series of vicious comments in return. Jake's older brother takes him to get drunk at a strip club. The kids speak in obscenities and vulgarities, and this is taken for granted by parents. When Megan refers to her father with a profane expression, he responds by asserting, "You do not speak to your father that way." Well, Megan quite obviously *does* speak to her father that way.

The teenagers in *American Teen* are indeed stereotypes, but they are stereotypes with a ring of authenticity. This is depressing, but true. Some of the movie's critics suggest that Burstein has presented a white-washed tableau of American adolescence. Many viewers will fear that they are right — even with all the problems of these five teens taken into consideration. This is small-town American after all.

There are no pregnant teenage girls, no stoned-out teenagers, no boys facing repeated juvenile charges. Are these teens not to be found in Warsaw?

But there are other teenagers missing from this picture of "realistic" adolescence. There are no teenagers who are believing and practicing Christians, none whose parents seem to be good examples to their children, none who appear to be looking and living for anything more significant than immediate gratification, popularity, or earthly glory.

American Teen is likely to be a critical success and to attract considerable buzz at the box office. The message of the movie seems to be that this is just what adolescence is all about and how teenagers really live and think — parents must just accept this and get out of the way. Nevertheless, if Christian parents see this movie, they are more likely to be newly determined not to settle for this reality for their own teenage children. Thankfully, *American Teen* doesn't have to be the story of *your* American teen.

