



**MEMBER EXCLUSIVES**

# Booksmart

‘It’s hilarious and just wonderful! It’s such a great film in terms of representation, and not clichéd at all’

**Emilie Cuning, BFI Member**

In a long line of teen comedies mostly set over the course of one evening, and which thus have *American Graffiti* (1973) in their DNA, *Booksmart* celebrates the intimacy of women’s closest early friendships while acknowledging their transience. Whereas the analogous end-of-high-school comedies *Superbad* (2007) and *Blockers* (2018) depict the quests of their respective male and female characters to lose their virginities, actor Olivia Wilde’s riotous first feature as director has a comparatively thin premise: it shows the efforts of two best buddies and unpopular super-swots – introspective social activist Amy and ebullient valedictorian Molly – to attend their first party.

Desire ostensibly motivates them. Amy, who’s been out for two years but is still a virgin, likes the androgynous skater girl Ryan, while Molly, who’s straight, admires gorgeous Nick. Their academic self-closeting, however, has ill equipped them to attract their crushes. Amy, entranced by swimming underwater at Nick’s party with Ryan in the film’s atypically lyrical centrepiece, deludes herself that she has a chance with her, only to be rudely awakened while she’s still in Nick’s pool. Molly is similarly disillusioned minutes later. Amy’s attempt to make love to Hope, a scathing ex-classmate, goes wrong when she throws up on her.

These tenderly observed, relatable romantic failures, which can be filed away as experience, serve the movie’s focus on Amy and Molly’s bond. Nothing that happens during the incident-packed evening is more significant than Molly’s discovering that Amy has deferred entering Columbia University to spend a gap year volunteering in Botswana, spoiling their plan to take a post-college trip and move to Washington (presumably DC, since Molly aims to be the youngest Supreme Court Justice).

En route to Nick’s party, Amy and Molly (drolly played by Kaitlyn Dever and *Lady Bird*’s Beanie Feldstein) run into their former class teacher, who says she’ll gladly give them a ride because it saves her from ‘watching *Gilmore Girls* again’.

That offhand reference makes clear the debt that *Booksmart* owes to Amy Sherman-Palladino’s 2000-07 TV series about the relationship of a go-getting single mother and her academically gifted teenage daughter. Like the show’s Lorelai and Rory, Amy and Molly trade in a rapid-fire, pop-culture-infused comic dialogue. Unlike Rory and her high-school and Yale friends, Amy and Molly casually discuss masturbation and lesbian porn (Amy wants tips), and quip about their vaginas, though less graphically than does Amy Schumer in her comedy routines. The film’s writers (Katie Silberman and Susanna Fogel reworked Sarah Haskins and Emily Halpern’s original script) delight in puncturing taboos about female sexuality. The pungent one-liners need to be heard, not read in a review.

*Booksmart*’s cautious empowerment of its naive twosome doesn’t patronise them or promise them the moon, despite Molly’s vaunting ambition.

The movie is exemplary in its non-issue approach to integrating LGBTQ characters, especially Amy and the loner Hope. Theatre-mad George and his flamboyant boyfriend Alan may be clichéd gay men, but that doesn't make them untruthful. Heteronormativity is represented by Molly's tentative involvements with Nick and another boy, Jared, and by Miss Fine's hook-up with her former student Theo. But testosterone only wells up in a smartphone shot that shows one of Nick's fellow jocks karate-chopping a stack of pizzas. The pizza delivery driver exposed as a strangler is a caricature played for laughs.

Screenplay practice insists that protagonists change, but *Booksmart's* writers tweak that concept. Amy and Molly only mildly evolve, but key secondary characters do change, or information is revealed that shows them to be other than what they seem. The proudly promiscuous Triple A (her name connoting porn and 2010's *The Scarlet Letter* update Easy A) suddenly expresses anxiety about her reputation. Hope's cynicism evaporates when Amy kisses her, suggesting it was motivated by frustration. Jared, a flashy rich boy who fails to impress women, endears himself to Molly by admitting he's a virgin. His posh friend Gigi may be a Blanche DuBois in training, but she's also sad and loyal, Jared tells Molly. The message is that no one leaves high school fully formed.

Wilde has mounted a sparkling display on the film's modest framework, conjuring memories of Susan Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985). The blend of Jason McCormick's fixed and handheld cinematography, the use of low angles, jump cuts and startling transitions and the pell-mell pacing capture the emotional turmoil underpinning Amy and Molly's hapless adventuring. (The abrasive hip-hop score amps up the sense of disorder.) Wilde's satirical *coup de foudre* is an animated *Toy Story* episode in which Amy and Molly, tripping like crazy, are nightmarishly transformed into big-eyed, large-breasted, Barbie-like dolls, the antithesis of what these smart women want to be. The film's up-to-the-minute consciousness is further expressed in Molly's unfinished line in her graduation speech: 'Straight white men, your time is...'

**Graham Fuller, *Sight & Sound*, July 2019**

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## BOOKSMART

*Directed by:* Olivia Wilde

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*Presented by:* Annapurna Pictures, Gloria Sanchez Productions

*Executive Producers:* Will Ferrell, Adam McKay, Jillian Longnecker, Scott Robertson, Alex G. Scott

*Produced by:* Megan Ellison, Jessica Elbaum, Katie Silberman, Chelsea Barnard, David Distenfeld

*Written by:* Katie Silberman, Emily Halpern, Sarah Haskins, Susanna Fogel

*Director of Photography:* Jason McCormick

*Edited by:* Brent White, Jamie Gross

*Production Designer:* Katie Byron

*Costume Designer:* April Napier

*Music:* Dan the Automator

*Production Sound Mixer:* Lisa Pinero

## Cast

Beanie Feldstein (*Molly*)

Kaitlyn Dever (*Amy*)

Jessica Williams (*Miss Fine*)

Lisa Kudrow (*Charmaine*)

Will Forte (*Doug*)

Jason Sudeikis (*Principal Brown*)

Billie Lourd (*Gigi*)

Diana Silvers (*Hope*)

Skyler Gisondo (*Jared*)

Molly Gordon (*Triple A*)

Noah Galvin (*George*)

Austin Crute (*Alan*)

USA 2019

102 mins

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## EVENTS & STRANDS

### Member Exclusives: Booksmart

Thu 20 May 18:10

**The Human Voice** + pre-recorded intro and Q&A with Pedro Almodóvar and Tilda Swinton

Sat 22 May 15:00; Tue 1 Jun 18:20

### Woman with a Movie Camera:

**Rare Beasts + Q&A with writer-director Billie Piper**

Sat 22 May 17:15

### Sheffield Doc/Fest

Fri 4 Jun 20:15

### Preview: Doctor Who: Dragonfire

Sat 12 Jun 12:00

### Relaxed Screenings: The Reason I Jump

Fri 18 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:10

### Woman with a Movie Camera: Wildfire

Sun 20 Jun 18:40 (+ Q&A with director Cathy Brady); Mon 21 Jun 18:10;

Tue 22 Jun 14:40; Wed 23 Jun 20:50; Thu 24 Jun 14:45

## BAGRI FOUNDATION LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

### LIFF Opening Night: WOMB (Women of My Billion)

+ on stage Q&A with Srishti Bakshi and film critic Anna Smith

Thu 17 Jun 17:20

### My Beautiful Laundrette

Fri 18 Jun 20:20

### The Warrior + on-stage career interview with writer-director Asif Kapadia

Sat 19 Jun 20:30

### Ahimsa: Gandhi the Power of the Powerless

Sun 20 Jun 15:00

### Searching for Happiness...

Tue 22 Jun 20:50

### Nazarband Captive

Wed 23 Jun 20:45

### A'hr Kayattam

Thu 24 Jun 18:00

### The Salt in Our Waters Nonajoler Kabbo

Sun 27 Jun 15:00

## LONDON SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

### UK Competition 1: I Forgot More than You'll Ever Know

Sat 26 Jun 21:00

### UK Competition 3: Close Quarters

Fri 26 Jun 21:10

### UK Competition 2: The Double Life Of...

Mon 28 Jun 17:45

### UK Competition 4: Lessons in Survival

Tue 29 Jun 21:10

### UK Competition 5: The Devil's in the Details

Wed 30 Jun 17:50

## TONGUES ON FIRE: UK ASIAN FILM FESTIVAL

### Opening Night: Raahgir The Wayfarers

+ Skype Q&A with director Goutam Ghose

Wed 26 May 20:45

### Closing Night: The Beatles and India

+ Q&A with directors Ajoy Bose and Peter Compton

Sun 6 Jun 15:15

## FAMILIES

### Popeye

Sun 13 Jun 12:50; Tue 29 Jun 17:50

### Wolfwalkers + pre-recorded Q&A with directors Tomm More and

Ross Stewart from the 2020 BFI London Film Festival

Sat 19 Jun 12:10

### Raya and the Last Dragon

Sun 20 Jun 12:10

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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