

Eighth Grade

Kayla Day (Elsie Fisher) is 13 and in her last week of eighth grade and looking forward—with trepidation—to high school in her benign suburb. The year has been hard on the naturally shy kid (who doesn't have a mom in her life), as she struggles to find herself. Generally addicted, like many of her peers, to her electronic devices, she tries to salve her ego with her own webcast, stumbling to express mini-profundities—like “being yourself”—in a delivery littered with “ya knows” and “likes” to a audience of which she knows nothing.

Kayla also desperately wants to be cool but can't, like, seem to achieve it. She's embarrassed at a pool party, which she is attending only through the beneficence of a popular girl's mother. While there, she can only attract the attention of a nerdy boy, Gabe (Jake Ryan), pays some attention to her. Connecting with others is essential to her, but she has little knack for it. She tries to play up to more worldly girls and, a bit desperately, researches sex acts in an attempt to interest vapid boys. At the year-end school assembly, her mortification is complete by being named “Most Quiet” student in the school.

Her semi-clueless single dad Mark (Josh Hamilton) loves her and tries to buck Kayla up, but it's hard when he can't enter her well of isolation or reach her through the fog of social media (she's obviously on her phone at dinner). She has a small breakthrough when a high school shadow program matches her with the Olivia (Emily Robinson), a lively teen who becomes a mentor to her, but another encounter on a drive with an older boy (Daniel Zolghadri) turns ugly when he suggests a sordid “truth or dare” exchange. Kayla's review of her earlier sixth-grade time capsule causes her to reject her past and try to look forward with some measure of confidence.

“Eighth Grade” stands or falls on the performance of 15-year-old Elsie Fisher (an actor since she was five). Well, in her case, she stands tall—at probably 5' 3.” Maybe she is just playing herself, a prototype American teenager, but she makes the character of Kayla her own, appearing in virtually every scene. Her round face of acceptance, lightly sprinkled with adolescent zits, and her moony eyes seem just right for this puzzled, poignant young girl, as is her placid, hesitant voice searching for affirmation from everyone, someone. She is moody and muddled but still emits small bursts of courage in trying to grow up enough for the next stage of her life.

Writer/director Bo Burnham makes his feature film debut with “Eighth Grade” and reveals tremendous promise with this achievement. Burnham, though now all of 27, appears to have total recall of middle school and its multifarious humiliations. He had success early as a YouTube entertainer in his teens, writing and performing satirical gigs in his house, then moving on to stand-up comedy. He began a film career of his own with performances in films like last year's “The Big Sick.” His penetrating dive into the mind of an anxious but endearing young woman makes “Eighth Grade” a template for today's teens and a wonder for filmgoers.

(The film is rated “R” and runs 94 minutes.)

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