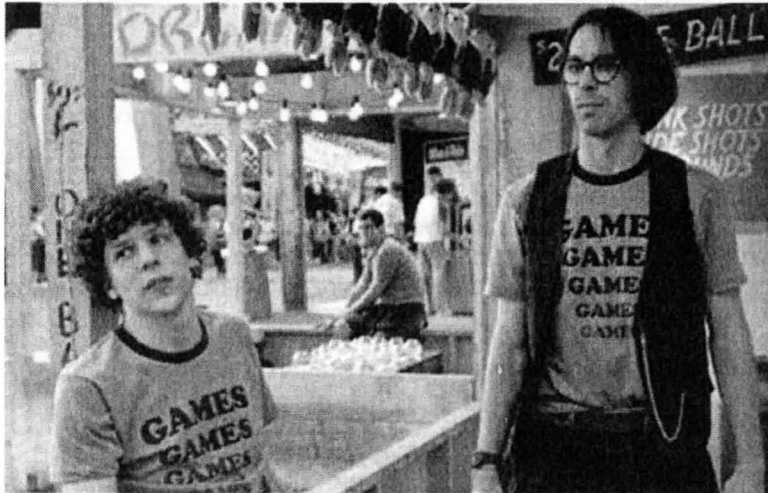


Lovable Traipsing: The Glory of *Adventureland*

Posted By [Robert Hubbard](#) On April 21, 2009 @ 9:36 am In [Movies/TV, Reviews](#) | [2 Comments](#)

So many of our great cultural narratives truthfully capture the transitional moments of life—from Holden Caulfield's ruinous attempts to achieve maturity in *Catcher in the Rye* to Elinor Dashwood's uncertain courtship in *Sense and Sensibility*. Because of their universality, we cannot help but share in these essential voyages toward becoming. And such transitions make for excellent drama, full of uncertainty, mystery, and longing.



Greg Mottola's new film, *Adventureland*, adds to this tradition of art about transitions. Regrettably, a misleading marketing campaign over-emphasizes the ribald guy humor in this gem of a little movie. In actuality, Mottola's bittersweet coming of age story occupies an aesthetic space closer to *The Graduate* or *Breaking Away* than *Porky's* or *American Pie*. It is a funny, honest, and occasionally heart-wrenching portrayal of the plight that all young adults

must face. Rudderless, they still must navigate the ephemeral border between adolescence and maturity.

The year is 1987. James (Jesse Eisenberg)—a brainy, middle-class kid from Pittsburgh—unexpectedly finds himself in need of a summer job. Because of their own financial difficulties, his parents retract their college graduation promise of a trip to Europe. Abandoned stateside by his wealthy college buddy, the liberally educated James must now scrimp and save every cent if he has any hope of affording graduate school at Columbia in the fall. He learns the hard way that his expensive college degree in comparative literature and Renaissance studies leaves him unqualified for, well, everything.

Bereft of options, James gamely takes a menial job at a local amusement park called Adventureland, a cross between a rundown *Six Flags* and the third layer of hell. The park consists of rigged games, dangerous rides, and an ample supply of oddball characters. Eccentric co-workers include married park managers Bobby and Paulette (*Saturday Night Live* vets Bill Hader and Kristen Wiig); the wise, Gogol-reading, pipe-smoking Joel (Martin Starr); and the terminally moody Em (Kristen Steward), a girl recklessly searching for intimacy after the loss of her mother to cancer.

Director and screenwriter Mottola gently guides his characters toward subtle and understated performances. Fulfilling the promise shown in a few years back in *The Squid and the Whale*. Eisenberg's James is likeable, sincere and utterly clueless in the ways of romance. When the girl of his dreams, Em, puts the brakes on their summer courtship, James foolishly risks this fledgling love to pursue Lisa P. (Margarita Levieva), the shallow disco queen of the park. He's such a well-meaning romantic idiot, you want to shake him and hug him for his hapless choices.

Following up her role in the mega-hit *Twilight*, Steward's Em helps us understand what all of the fuss is about. Her piercing stare radiates beauty, integrity and mystery. When one of her friends decides not to date the lovably nerdy Joel because of his Jewish heritage, Em publically rebukes and disowns her. But Em has secrets of her own that may prove even more embarrassing and destructive.

Much of the charm of *Adventureland* lies in the authentic way it captures the Zeitgeist of the late 1980s. For those of us who came of age in Reagan era America, the film offers a nostalgic romp. In addition to hair-spray-soaked mullets and preppy Izod shirts, an inspired mixture of 1980s pop music delightfully scores the film. Obnoxious dance tunes such as Falco's "Rock Me Amadeus" endlessly blare from the park's tilt-o-whirl ride. More substantive melodies by iconic artists such as Lou Reed and The Cure serendipitously resonate from car radios and mixed tapes.

Viewers should be warned that *Adventureland* does contain scenes of recreational drug use, as well as a share of vulgar humor. Personally, I found the repeated and numbing use of marijuana disturbing. But, as a recovering male adolescent, I confess that most of the humor in the film rings hysterically and embarrassingly true. The minor character of Frigo (Matt Bush) earns the most laughs. He's that guy you might remember from high school or college—the one who pathologically makes the grossest comments at the worst times, and who can never resist the temptation to repeatedly punch his closest friends in the privates. Yes, I winced at Frigo's awkwardness. I also laughed out loud.

And please understand, drug use and adolescent humor do not define *Adventureland*. These base activities only accentuate deeper themes. As we awkwardly traipse through the transitions of our lives, *Adventureland* poignantly reminds that we all share a need for love, the yearning for direction, the craving for community, and the desire to make our lives mean something.

We may not always agree with the choices that James and Em make in their journey, but we share in their longings.

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