

Making Queerness Commonplace
The ordinary importance of *Love, Simon*
By Chelsea Davis

While this is a review, it's not an overly critical one. It's an exploration of the power of this film and what it means to these communities.

I am a queer human and as such I was overly excited for the release of the film *Love, Simon*, a new teen romantic-comedy, with a twist: the main character was gay. You might be saying, "well Chelsea, there have been gay rom-coms before, so why is this revolutionary?" I'll tell you, friend. It's because this is one of, if not THE, first time a teen comedy with a gay protagonist was getting the support and backing of a major studio, mainstream buzz, and a wide release. It just hasn't happened. Studios haven't been willing to invest in such projects because they didn't feel like they'd get a good return on investment. So why even try, right?

I'd heard small talk of the film on the social media site Tumblr. The movie had a small but growing base of excited fans, mainly because the film was based off Becky Albertalli's book *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. This YA book was already pretty popular in the demographic it was intended for (youths) and had received a great deal of critical acclaim. Critics and fans alike often compared it to other "traditional" YA novels, and particularly those by John Greene (*The Fault in Our Stars*, *Paper Towns*, etc.).

I began hearing more and more about the film adaptation of the novel in Autumn of 2017 (last year); cast lists, director, music involved, early buzz, etc. I decided that, although I am not a teen (SHOCKING I know. I'm so youthful and my skin is so fresh...), I needed to go ahead and read this book.

I was FRESH off of my journey with Andre Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name*, another queer novel that was getting the Hollywood treatment. That novel was centered around the life of a 17-year old boy as well, however the subject matter was quite different. A little less YA targeted and a little more adults-remembering-awkward-first-loves-and-heartache targeted. AND BOY DID I FEEL IT. I felt that book hard and it stuck with me for quite a while. I didn't know if I was fully out of the haze of that experience, and therefore ready/in the right headspace for this cute, bright, and PG novel for teens.

I'm so glad I pushed past that trepidation and dove into the book. It was an easy and fast read, and oh so enjoyable. While it wasn't intended for me – both in age and in the fact that I'm not a gay man – I not only was entertained but moved. I was touched, I related, I felt so much for so many different characters – even the antagonist of the novel. Albertalli really knows how to dive into human complexity while keeping everything light.

Immediately after reading (and decompressing a bit) I began looking into its film adaptation *Love, Simon* even more. I was itching for the film to come out, I needed to see how Greg

Berlanti (director of the film and wunderkind creator of CW's DC superhero shows) was going to handle this piece of literature that became so instantly important to me – and to so many others. I was nervous but hopeful, and just all-around elated that I was even in place to have these complex feelings surrounding a gay YA rom-com.

The film finally came out in the US on March 16 and I dragged my roommate (and strong ally of the LGBTQ community) to the theaters to see it with me. I wanted someone to talk about it with...*and* I didn't want to be a lone adult at a movie for teens. It just made me feel old, and sad. (Hahaha.)

The movie was lovely. It was polished and shiny and happy. It wasn't a hard pill to swallow. It was a romantic comedy! It had a happy ending. Things were tied up nicely. Conflicts resolved. It followed somewhat of a formula for teen comedies. There was a party. There were antics. Wacky parents. It felt so lovely because it wasn't trying to be anything other than what it was – a romantic teen comedy. The only difference was the main kid was gay and kissed a boy at the end *AND* there was a little heart-to-heart that *did* feel like it had a bit more of an impact than in other rom-coms, only because the experience of coming to terms with your sexuality is quite life-altering and huge.

But really. It felt like a joyous combination of my favorite romantic comedies from days past. *Never Been Kissed*. A little *10 Things I Hate About You*. That one with Mandy Moore where she doesn't die. You know?

Some critics have panned the movie for exactly what I describe above. And while I understand where they're coming from – the banality and squeakiness of it all – I would want to challenge them to express exactly why they're railing on it so hard? No, *Love, Simon* didn't delve into the complexities of society. No. It didn't even *fully* explore the reality and trauma of coming to terms with your sexuality – and then subsequently putting it out into the universe. BUT why does it have to? Why does it have to be all of these things to all sorts of people? Why does it have to have some greater meaning when more than half of the formulaic rom-coms out there have no greater meaning beyond quick and cute love? Why can't it be perfectly uneventful but delightful. Because it kind of was.

I will say, it did discuss the trauma of coming out - that fear, that anxiety, etc. - because that was the central conflict of the film. However, the film/book places Simon in an idyllic world of sorts. His parents are incredibly progressive and well-off, as are his friends and school – EVEN in the South (the book/film is set just outside of Atlanta). It did feel slightly different than “normal” because the conflict at hand wasn't a love triangle or work interference or when the protagonist should get a makeover and become the gorgeous popular girl she was meant to be. The conflict was a bit deeper. It was a mix of self-acceptance and social acceptance for something that you cannot change, but many people think you can and that you're wrong. It's a conflict that plays on the fears of those who've lived it – fears that people won't love you or accept you, or at the

very least that they won't treat you quite the same as before. Do you trade one avenue of happiness for another?

This movie, even in its brightly-toned, Disney-esque utopia, is incredibly relevant, important, and needed. I needed it as a teen. Teens need it now. I needed it now. Queer content isn't often super available. It's not backed by major companies and it's not marketed for a wide release. Not usually. And when it is, it's often content that is A) more dramatic B) more traumatic and C) geared towards adults. So you have smaller, indie, low-budget films that get limited releases, and aren't often met with a happy ending...or great acting. And that's it. That's what us queers have, and again, I'm an adult, so my breadth and depth of content is much greater than for teens.

I suppose, in discussing the film here, I'm realizing it was bit deeper and more complex than I left the theater thinking (with tear-stained cheeks mind you). Was it as "deep" and complex as any of the Oscar noms this year? Not really...maybe *The Shape of Water*, but that's neither here nor there. Was it any different, truly, in structure and subject matter, than any other teen rom-com out there? Again, no, not really. But again, *THAT* in and of itself, is kind of awesome. It's kind of revolutionary. The fact that it's a regular ol' teen comedy is truly, truly wonderful. It's a film that is normalizing queerness, by not making it into this showy, spectacle. While it might be a little overly-idyllic and polished...it's refreshing. It's heartwarming. It's incredibly important and *needed*.