

The Perks of Being a Wallflower: Growing up in the early 1990s

David Walsh
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Written and directed by Stephen Chbosky, based on his novel

In Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, based on his 1999 novel, the central character, Charlie (Logan Lerman), is a 15-year-old high school student in Pittsburgh in the early 1990s. He narrates the story in the form of letters to an anonymous "friend."

Reserved and introverted, Charlie does not like school, its various rituals, cliques and social obligations. A bright kid, he is quickly taken under the wing of two seniors, Patrick (Ezra Miller), who is gay, his step-sister, Sam (Emma Watson), and their small circle of friends.

We learn that Charlie's best friend has recently committed suicide, for unspecified reasons, and that his favorite relative, his aunt Helen (Melanie Lynskey), died when he was seven years old. He has an older, socially active sister, with whom he has a fairly tense relationship and another brother, away at college.

Charlie gains, almost by accident, a girl-friend and then loses her, more or less to his relief, when he admits to liking someone else better. He becomes close to his English teacher, Mr. Anderson (Paul Rudd), who gives him special assignments and books to read, including J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and others.

Patrick and one of the high school's star football players, Brad (Johnny Simmons), are having an affair. When Brad's father finds out, he beats the boy up. Brad responds by turning on Patrick.

Sam is going out with a college student, who is seeing other girls behind her back. Charlie has a crush on her, but she seems out of his league. He is helping her study for her college admissions test.

Various emotional pressures and crises come to a head. Charlie loses control when he comes to Patrick's aid in a fist fight in the school cafeteria and later Sam's physically coming on to him drives him over the edge. Incidents from his childhood that Charlie has suppressed flood his consciousness and overwhelm him.

Chbosky attempts in his novel to reproduce the thinking, feeling and writing style of a teenager. *The Catcher in the Rye* is an obvious influence. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* begins, "Dear friend, I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have. Please don't try to figure out who she is because then you might figure out who I am, and I really don't want you to do that. ... I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands and doesn't try to sleep with people even if they could have. I need to know that these people exist."

The approach is successful at times in both book and film. Chbosky, one feels, genuinely cares for his characters. The work makes a case for tolerance, difference, sympathy ...

The actors offer sensitive performances. Lerman is fine in the lead, Watson is appropriately charismatic as Sam and Miller, last seen as a mass killer in the deplorable *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, is amusingly flamboyant and believable here.

Some of the incidents have the ring of truth: Charlie's initial experience with drugs, his first infatuations and emotional missteps, his assorted perplexities and pleasures.

Chbosky's book was very popular with young people and has reportedly sold more than one million copies. Naturally, its relatively forthright treatment of drug use

and sexuality has created controversy too. The novel has been banned by various libraries, and throughout the past decade the American Library Association consistently listed *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* as one of the books most under attack by the self-appointed guardians of morals in the US.

That being said, it should quickly be added that the work is relatively innocuous and hardly represents a threat to the American way of life.

Whereas Holden Caulfield in Salinger's novel, although far from a socially conscious rebel, comes into conflict with an adult world full of "phonies" and hypocrites and longs for an honest existence, even if it costs him a good deal, there is barely a hint of opposition or criticism in Chbosky's work. The rebellion represented by Sam and Patrick hardly deserves the name, not going beyond a certain sexual and lifestyle distinctness. Identity politics raises its ugly head ...

Chbosky is much less daring than he and perhaps some of his readers imagine him to be, and this causes problems. Charlie of course is not a genuinely marginalized "wallflower," even in an ironic sense, except perhaps for the first five minutes of the film. In fact, he falls in with the coolest, hippest kids and they open all sorts of vistas for him.

And these "coolest, hippest kids" themselves have thoroughly conventional values and aims. They seem headed, virtually without exception, for college and then professional careers, following in their parents' footsteps. The highest ambition of Sam, the sexual adventurer and alluring girl of Charlie's dreams, is apparently to gain admission to Penn State University! Whether her hopes will be fulfilled or not creates one of the film's most important dramatic tensions. One's jaw drops. This is pitifully small change.

A few things were happening in the wider world in the early 1990s and they had an impact on the stagnant cultural and emotional climate of the time, including in American high schools. Most of our filmmakers, who themselves were shaped in part by that climate, accept the latter as uncritically as they do the solar system.

Chbosky was born in Pittsburgh in 1970, the son of a tax preparer and a steel company executive/consultant to CFOs, and graduated from the University of Southern California's screenwriting program in 1992. After writing *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and

several screenplays that were not produced, Chbosky helped to create and produce the CBS television series *Jericho* (2006-07), about a Kansas town in the wake of a nuclear war. One feels a rather comfortable, complacent generation and milieu speaking through him.

The novelist's persistence in attempting to bring his own novel to the screen deserves credit. However, the result, while generally pleasant, is neither compelling nor memorable enough. The figures and situations are somewhat familiar, generic, rounded off. The resort to child abuse as the source of emotional distress is fatally clichéd by this time, and wrongheaded. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* holds out promise, before—in the end—substantially disappointing.



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