

Bleed for This and *The Edge of Seventeen*: Are these any match for the times?

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Bleed for This, written and directed by Ben Younger;
The Edge of Seventeen, written and directed by Kelly Fremon Craig

Bleed for This

Ben Younger's gritty biographical movie *Bleed for This*, about boxer Vinny Pazienza, now known as Vinny Paz, centers on the fighter's astonishing recovery from a crippling car accident in 1991 and his return to the ring. While not a household name, the "blue collar" boxer from Providence, Rhode Island, nicknamed "The Pazmanian Devil," was born in 1962 and held world titles at lightweight, light middleweight and super middleweight. His comeback is one of the greatest and most remarkable in boxing history.

Miles Teller convincingly plays Vinny, who—as the film opens in 1988—is sweating off excess pounds to qualify for the junior-welterweight title fight. After losing the match in a knockout to Roger Mayweather (Peter Quillin), however, he is dumped by his management team led by Lou Duva (Ted Levine).

Vinny is an obsessively hard-working athlete, hailing from one of the poorest regions in New England—in fact, 41 percent of Providence's children live in poverty. His father, Angelo (Ciáran Hinds), is an enthusiastic supporter of his son's career, as much for himself as for the boxer, while Vinny's mother, Louise (Katey Sagal), grips a rosary and lights candles to her Catholic icons every time one of her son's fights is televised.

After the Mayweather defeat, Vinny begins to train with Kevin Rooney (Aaron Eckhart, transformed by baldness and a potbelly), an alcoholic recently fired by heavyweight Mike Tyson. The athlete and trainer, each

apparently on a downward spiral, desperately need one another. Kevin's first unorthodox move is to jump Vinny up two weight classes to junior middleweight. Not favored in the match, Vinny delivers a spectacular championship win against Frenchman Gilbert Delé in front of a roaring Providence crowd.

But the glow of being a world champion vanishes when Vinny is grievously injured in a head-on car collision. With a broken neck, the doctors place zero odds at Vinny ever boxing again. In fact, he may never be able to walk, unless his neck is fused to his spine in a procedure Vinny strenuously rejects.

The stubborn athlete takes a much riskier gamble on the "halo" surgery, which involves attaching a medieval-looking metal ring to Vinny's head by drilling four hefty screws into his cranium. When the barely mobile Vinny finally returns home, he starts secretly training in the basement of the Pazienza home. Soon he enlists Kevin in his seemingly impossible scheme to return to physical normalcy and resume his career.

Bleed for This is at its best when it calls attention to Vinny's working class core and environment. The shots of Providence's run-down neighborhoods and streets are striking and infuse strength and credibility into the performances of the actors. Eckhart is particularly moving and effective, but Teller, Sagal and Hinds are fine as members of a boisterous, close-knit Italian family who are refreshingly more selfless than selfish.

The filmmakers have crafted characters who are flawed, and recognizable, but who come together with an unusual degree of feeling and honesty. *Bleed for This*, however, is only semi-successful in its efforts to avoid Hollywood formulae and stereotypes in regard, first, to the ability of individuals to overcome insurmountable obstacles by sheer will, and, second, more generally, to the "resilience of the human spirit."

The Edge of Seventeen

Writer/director Kelly Fremon Craig's debut, *The Edge of Seventeen*, focuses on “edgy” teenager Nadine (Hailee Steinfeld), who is quick-witted, but impatient and judgmental. Hard to take, she is friendless, except for Krista (Haley Lu Richardson) who signs on to Nadine's self-imposed isolation until she falls for the latter's “perfect” brother Darian (Blake Jenner).

As Nadine is alienated from Darian, she feels betrayed by Krista and ends their long-time relationship. In addition, the death, a few years back, of her beloved father—who functioned as something of an emotional buffer—leaves Nadine to the not-so-tender mercies of her overwhelmed mother (Kyra Sedgwick—“I am done trying to understand you”).

With a psyche that is alternately tough and fragile, Nadine turns to her deadpan, but perceptive teacher (Woody Harrelson), who wisely knows how to handle Nadine's outrageousness, including her dramatic but half-hearted suicide threats.

As far as Nadine's love life goes, it is utterly predictable, including the detour from “bad guy” to “good guy.”

The timeless, location-neutral *The Edge of Seventeen* is a movie so flimsy that it seems to have been primarily conceived of and developed as a vehicle for the amusing Steinfeld. Craig has created such a strong gravitational force around her protagonist that the talented supporting cast is sidelined and reduced to something less than a group of complete human beings.

In light of the relative slightness of these two films and many others, on the one hand, and recent political events, on the other, one has to ask: how prepared are filmmakers for the convulsions to come? The answer should be clear.



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