

SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS

Hollywood has never been known for its accuracy about anything, much less historical facts. Amateur historians devote websites to cataloguing movie mistakes (My personal favorite: In TITANIC, Jack tells Rose he went ice fishing in Lake Wissota, but that lake didn't exist until 1918. Take that James Cameron! If you'd spent some of that money on a fact checker maybe the movie wouldn't have lost the best screenplay Oscar.)

I find it curious that anybody, even those with lives to kill on the world wide web, would assume that historical films have anything other than a tangential relationship to the time periods they claim to recreate. When a writer or a director overtly acknowledges that he's using a historical setting to talk about his own present, it's called an allegory (classic high school example: THE CRUCIBLE, that play that had all those puritans in it but was really about McCarthyism). But "realistic" historical dramas rarely manage to capture anything other than the time that dreamed them. These films may be less conscientious than their politically sensitive cousin, the allegory, but their bumbling, culturally insensitive attempts to make conversation often make more intriguing artifacts.

With this in mind, it is no surprise that SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS tells us far more about the 1960s America that swooned for it than the 1920s America it's supposed to recreate. Natalie Wood and Warren Beatty play two young high school students (Bud and Deenie) who really, really want to "do" each other (or they are totally, desperately in love. It depends on your historical perspective.) But she's a good girl, and good girls don't get it on. In the face of their ever-increasing horniness, they seek advice from the adults in their lives. Deenie's mother tells her that nice women have no sexual feelings towards men; Bud's father tells him to sleep with a "bad" girl and leave Deenie alone. Bud becomes so crazed that he gets pneumonia and misses an entire semester of school.

Unlike Deenie's mother, Bud's sister Ginny believes wholeheartedly that women have sexual urges. Having recently returned home after having an abortion (referred to as "that horrible surgery"), she spins further and further out of sexual control, sleeping with bootleggers and gas station attendants. After her father rejects a kiss from her at a New Year's Eve party (it's hinted in a previous scene that their relationship may have been incestuous), she drunkenly offers herself to a group of men. They pass her around as she stumbles into the parking lot, and one of them takes her into a car where Bud eventually finds her. He pulls the man off his sister and gets beaten up in the process.

After watching his sister's drunken sexual breakdown, Bud does what every red-blooded American boy would do: he dumps Deenie and sleeps with the high school slut. In response, Deenie goes nuts, and by nuts, I mean she runs out of class and has to be drugged to stop screaming. After being sent home, she spends days moping around her house, unable to eat or sleep. While she takes a bath, her mother asks her if she has remained "pure." Deenie then has violent fit #2 and screams, "Yes, I am pure. Yes I am pure," and runs around their house naked. After one of Bud's friends asks Deenie to the dance, Deenie decides she will go and win Bud back by giving him what he has always wanted. That's right, little Deenie decides to give it up. Bud rejects her advances, and she

tries to kill herself, leading to her commitment mental institution. The two lovers don't see each other until several years later. By then, Bud's married to an Italian waitress, and Deenie's engaged to a doctor who was formerly a patient at the mental institution.

Although *SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS* has some of the props of the 1920s (flapper dresses, plot points that hinge on Black Friday), everything else about it reeks of the distinctly clinical perfume of 1950s Hollywood. Even its main characters age is more typical of the 1950s than the 1920s, since it was only after World War II that the US became unhealthily obsessed with the teenage love and virginity.

Bud and Deenie are so virginal that don't even really know how to talk about sex. In one of the film's best scenes, Bud explains to his doctor his predicament: he can't kiss Deenie without thinking about sex, and he can't marry her to have sex because his father won't let him. His doctor just does not respond, even though Bud asks him the question several times. It's hard to imagine the fast-talking men and women of 1930s romances shutting up long enough to even ask a question about anything, much less one about sex. Bud and Deenie's complete and total failure of language is a conceit that can be a little difficult to believe (I mean come on, Kansas is farm country. No pig ever worried about being "a good girl"). Kazan himself acknowledges that their innocence may be exaggerated. At a school dance, Bud chases Deenie into a backroom where teenagers drink, make out, and have sex in the back of cars without getting pneumonia or having nervous breakdowns. Bud and Deenie seem to occupy a different plane than their fellow students, one where their parents, their doctors, and their analysts shape the entire body of knowledge.

It's hard to watch *SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS* without snickering at Bud and Deenie's innocent idiocy, their implicit trust of the adults around them. But this reaction has more to do with my historical context than the their emotional truth. It's hard to believe in Bud and Deenie when you were born into a world where adolescent revolt is sitcom material and losing your virginity is often more of a chore than a meaningful act. But Bud and Deenie's trust is what gives their eventual rejection of their parents a weighty choice. Bud's decision to move to a farm and have a family that in no way resembles the one he grew up with foreshadows the choices of a generation who will reject their parent's values (at least for a time) in favor of ones they hope will create a world more of their own choosing. I can't help but think that if my generation had ever had a small piece of Bud and Deenie's earnest faith, we might be less willing to accept the way things are and more capable of fighting for a world that is ours.