

Tearjerking ‘The Fault in Our Stars’ is ‘The Notebook’ of This Decade

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sure, I’ll admit it. With so many new films to screen and review, I’ll choose the sci-fi action/thriller from the man behind the Bourne flicks over a movie that’s being called “the greatest romance story of this decade”.

But when realizing I only have time this week to write “The Fault in Our Stars” or “Edge of Tomorrow,” the choice – albeit unusual for me because of my love for sci-fi – comes quickly without thinking twice. While comparing them is like apples and orange, the first won’t stand the test of time while the latter will stay with you for years to come.



Hazel (Shailene Woodley) and Gus (Ansel Elgort) share a tender moment during a memorable trip to Amsterdam in “The Fault of Our Stars”.

Photo credit: James Bridges, 20th Century Fox

My interest in “The Fault in Our Stars” wasn’t typical. It was piqued while interviewing co-stars Shailene Woodley and Ansel Elgort at the [Chicago red-carpet premiere](#) [21] not for this romantic drama with a \$12 million budget but for the blockbuster “Divergent” with an \$85 million budget.

I recall Shailene being soft spoken and even shy in my interview. While being required to talk about “Divergent” and the healthy paycheck she’s getting from that series, she was clearly more fired up by discussing the upcoming smaller movie that she’d star in just 3 months later. Though the 23-year-old Shailene already had more star power because of her breakout role in “The Descendants,” speaking to the 20-year-old Ansel was a different experience.

He struck me as raw, humble talent who is still sponging in the fact that he’s just now getting famous. “The Fault in Our Stars” will put him over the top to women and men everywhere as it’ll be *his* breakout role as the film’s male romantic lead. It’s impossible not to compare him to Ryan Gosling’s effectiveness in 2004’s romantic gem “The Notebook” with Rachel McAdams.

While women get stereotyped as being more attracted to the “chick flick” than guys, “The Notebook” was the rarity that bridged both genders. It brought them together by choice rather than force. While “The Notebook” was the romantic star of the last decade, this has rarely happened since. Good try, “The Vow” and “About Time,” but pretty much no guy wanted to see Hollywood’s romance star in those unless their girlfriends bribed them.



Left to right: Gus (Ansel Elgort), Isaac (Nat Wolff) and Hazel (Shailene Woodley) enjoy their egg-throwing prank in “The Fault of Our Stars”.

Photo credit: James Bridges, 20th Century Fox

“The Fault in Our Stars” returns us to the magic gender-crushing ingredients in “The Notebook”. It figures out how to do what so many other romance films fail to: put a guy and a girl together and actually release in them natural, real chemistry instead of artificially forcing them to feel it. When they fake it, audiences know it and don’t fall in love when they try to for a couple hours.

This film’s allure starts and finishes with its story while the actors are there to do the compelling material justice. “The Fault in Our Stars” was doing things right even before I got to the screening. It’s based on the best-selling novel by John Green, which is Hollywood’s way of assuring a film will have a financial safety net through a built-in audience. But even more, it’s written by Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber, who both co-wrote the lovable indie films “The Spectacular Now” in 2013 and 2009’s “(500) Days of Summer”.

They’ve already proven success with this genre. While the 2009 film paired Joseph Gordon-Levitt with Zooey Deschanel, in 2013 it was an enjoyable Miles Teller with – yes – Shailene Woodley yet again. Neustadter and Weber are making a killing on Woodley, and while it’s hard to find faults in what they did with “The Spectacular Now,” this time they’ve gone above and beyond to allow guys and girls alike to fall in love with them.

I wasn’t sold at first. This film’s first act both draws me in and spits me out. I successfully started caring about this couple early on, but can’t help but scoff when he says “I’m in love with you” sooner than I would have believed. All the while, he’s scripted to say all the perfect things at just the right moments. Real love stories rarely happen this way – you know, the way they do “in the movies” – and I struggle with overlooking that.



Gus (Ansel Elgort) and Hazel (Shailene Woodley) share a love that sweeps them on an unforgettable journey in “The Fault of Our Stars”.

Photo credit: James Bridges, 20th Century Fox

But the film’s second act leaps me over the hump. While I accidentally had a stack of napkins left over from my theatre snacks and I divvied them out to nearby female movie watchers, I quietly kept a couple for myself. I even needed to dab the corners of my own eyes a few times. This is rare – not because I’m a guy and “I don’t cry,” but just because most films don’t naturally cause me to.

“The Fault in Our Stars” starts with what could be interpreted as a potentially exploitative premise. Just 10 years later, Tom Hanks’ “Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close” examined a story set in the 9/11 tragedy. It got crucified for its insensitivity and using the tragically emotional topic for financial gain. Likewise, “The Fault in Our Stars” touches on a subject that’s even more prevalent in mostly everyone’s life in either direct or indirect fashion: cancer.

“The Fault in Our Stars” will tell you it’s a love story and not a “cancer movie”. In reality, it’s most certainly both and it’s simultaneously happy while being heartbreaking. Thanks to Ansel Elgort, the film successfully finds comedy in its tragedy in much the same way 1997’s hidden gem “Life is Beautiful” allows you to laugh about a subject like the Holocaust when you never think you could.

Laughter is powerful medicine especially when actual doctors can’t save you. “The Fault in Our Stars” realizes this and blends comedy with romance while telling what is at its heart a tragically sad story. I criticize so many films that attempt to sell co-stars as having any inkling of on-screen chemistry because so often they just don’t. Shailene Woodley and Ansel Elgort actually do.



Hazel (Shailene Woodley) and Gus (Ansel Elgort) in “The Fault of Our Stars”.

Photo credit: James Bridges, 20th Century Fox

They meet in a place and in a life state when their hearts are ripe for the plucking. Hazel Grace (Shailene Woodley) has cancer and is always out of breath. Her parents are forcing her to attend a cancer support group because she might meet some friends. Gus (Ansel Elgort) previously had cancer and lost his leg, but really he’s there to support his friend, Isaac (Nat Wolff), who has lost one eye and is about to lose the other.

Even from the first moment they meet, Hazel and Gus aren’t forced into an impossible “love at first sight”. Gus confidently and curiously stares Hazel directly in her eyes at the support group’s circle of chairs. Hazel is both confused and interested. Yes, that could actually happen. And sure, he goes for the kill outside of the meeting by asking her to his house in a non-creepy, innocent and teenage way. I could see that happening, too.

From there, they become friends. He makes her feel beautiful when she’s feeling destroyed by her disease. She opens his eyes and helps him realize “oblivion” isn’t so scary. She shows him that he doesn’t have to change the whole world to have lived a worthwhile life. Most of us will never cure cancer, win a Pulitzer or become president.



Hazel (Shailene Woodley) and Gus (Ansel Elgort) take in the sights during an unforgettable trip to Amsterdam in "The Fault of Our Stars".

Photo credit: James Bridges, 20th Century Fox

And that's "okay". Our story's lovebirds even make it their catchphrase to say "okay" as a sign of being in love and on the same page. By contrast, Isaac and his girlfriend (who soon breaks up with him) unrealistically and forcibly say "always" to each other though that's unsustainable.

While Hazel is battling her declining health, she falls in love with a book and needs to understand its ending. Written by the character Van Houten (played by Willem Dafoe), she must brave a trip from the U.S. to Amsterdam against her doctor's orders. She's got to understand the ending of the book she has read a million times. Gus joins the cause, and even though Hazel has already used up her "wish" and the genies have already sent her to Disney World, Gus decides to use his one wish on Hazel's second dream in order to be with her while she lives it.

The trip doesn't go as planned – Van Houten is a bitter, cynical drunk – but Hazel and Gus fall in love and remind us that there's "always" a silver lining even when death's knocking on your door.

"The Fault in our Stars" stars Shailene Woodley, Ansel Elgort, Laura Dern, Sam Trammell, Willem Dafoe, Nat Wolff, Lotte Verbeek, Ana Dela Cruz, Randy Kovitz, David Whalen, Milica Govich and Emily Peachey from director Josh Boone and writers Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber based on the novel by John Green. The film has a running time of 125 minutes and opened on June 6, 2014. It is rated "PG-13" for thematic elements, some sexuality and brief strong language.



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