

Edge Ebbs & Flows in ‘The Edge of Seventeen’

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- [Adolescence](#) [2]
- [Blake Jenner](#) [3]
- [Hailee Steinfeld](#) [4]
- [Haley Lu Richardson](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Juno](#) [7]
- [Kyra Sedgwick](#) [8]
- [Movie Review](#) [9]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [10]
- [STX Entertainment](#) [11]
- [The Edge of Seventeen](#) [12]
- [Woody Harrelson](#) [13]



Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “The Edge of Seventeen” does attempt to do some different things with the growing-up-too-soon teenager soap opera – it throws in a authentic parent, contemporary sex issues and truthful awkwardness. But it can’t help being too heroic, and too “everything’s all right.”

Hailee Steinfeld (“True Grit”) has grown into the title 16 year-old called Nadine, and interprets the material with a decent strength of character. It would be easy to dismiss her performance as “Juno-Lite” (as I did when asked for an instant reaction), but she has a depth of field that goes underneath that surface, even though the screenplay – by writer/director Kelly Fremon Craig – kept feeding her the Juno-type lines. The story also has a juicy bit of desperation, since Nadine’s family is still reeling from the accidental death of their father five years before. The film didn’t need the Woody Harrelson “cool teacher” role, nor did it need some of the strange touches like Nadine’s penchant for seducing boys, then pulling the rug out once some action was attempted. Sure, it was a necessary reminder that ‘no means no,” but it is so crassly exposed that is was uncomfortable – which probably was the point.

Nadine (Steinfeld) and her best friend Krista (Haley Lu Richardson) are living the adolescent edge-of-seventeen life. Five years after the death of Nadine’s father, her mother Mona (Kyra Sedgwick) is trying to keep the family together – which includes Nadine’s brother Darian (Blake Jenner) – while still trying to make a relationship connection on her own.



Nadine (Hailee Steinfeld) and Krista (Haley Lu Richardson) are Hanging in ‘The Edge of Seventeen’
Photo credit: STX Entertainment

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When Mona decides to take a weekend with a new beau, Darian and Nadine throw a big party, and Nadine ends up blackout drunk. This allows Darian and Krista to hook up, and throws a wrench into Nadine's barely-in-control life. It turns out she has no friends besides Krista, so she now prefers to confide in her teacher Mr. Brunner (Woody Harrelson), and allows her life to fall off a cliff.

The background to the action is the most interesting part of the film, as the rag-tag family – Mona, Darian and Nadine – keep trying to make sense of their new roles after a tragic loss. Going from childhood to teenager-land after a father's death means a different kind of processing for the two siblings, especially since Darian is expected to take on a patriarchal role at 18 years old. He is not ready for it, and the family teeters within that instability.

Because of this, the film gives the mother character – portrayed to perfection by Kyra Sedgwick – a chance to have some real emotions and reactions in such a circumstance. The pressure to be provider, mother and single woman is getting to her, and she is appropriately and inappropriately lashing out toward her kids. This exacerbates a powder keg of issues with Nadine, and puts intense stress on Damian – who Blake Jenner deftly portrays beyond the “cute boy” stereotype.



Nadine and Mr. Brunner (Woody Harrelson) on 'The Edge of Seventeen'

Photo credit: STX Entertainment

But unfortunately, the movie shifts from this story to Nadine's story, and that is where the fall down occurs. Woody Harrelson's teacher character is supposed to be the hip, with-it and cynical sounding board, but ends up being opposite to those traits, which is damned annoying. The “boyfriends” that Nadine accumulates also are suspect, and go through that aforementioned seduction rite of passage, and end up in the freezer. These elements lessen the film's impact overall, along with Nadine's penchant for Juno-like musings. Not to second guess, but it might have been a much better film had the movie stuck with the darker parts of the story.

I suspect, however, the performance of Hailee Steinfeld and the contemporary teen variations will pull in a better word-of-mouth ranking for certain audiences. This is the problem of being a hip, with-it and cynical middle age man...sometimes I am opposite to those traits, and sometimes they take me right out of the picture.

"The Edge of Seventeen" opens everywhere November 18th. Featuring Hailee Steinfeld, Haley Lu Richardson, Blake Jenner, Kyra Sedgwick and Woody Harrelson. Written and directed by Kelly Fremon Craig. Rated "R"



[14]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/blake-jenner>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/hailee-steinfeld>
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- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/the-edge-of-seventeen>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/woody-harrelson>
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