

Juno – Get Real

(Excerpt) Jim DeRogatis, Chicago Sun Times, January 2008)

'Perfection in every aspect of the film', said the San Francisco Chronicle. 'Not a single false note', crowed The New Yorker. 'Just about the best movie of the year,' said Roger Ebert, 'for a while you wonder if this story of a pregnant teenager's coming of age will exhaust you with cleverness but by the end you've fallen in love with the thing.'

Well, no: as an unapologetically old-school feminist, the father of a soon-to-be-teenage daughter, a reporter who regularly talks to actual teens, and a plain old moviegoer, I hated, hated, hated this movie. A few of my many problems:

The notion that kids — even smart and sarcastic ones — talk like Juno is a lie only thirtysomething filmmakers and fiftysomething movie critics could buy. You want accurate wisecracking high-school dialog? You won't find it here. As Juno says, 'honest to blog!'

Are we really supposed to believe that a girl as intelligent and self-empowered as Juno, when determining the time to lose her virginity via a planned encounter with her best friend, neglects to bring birth control? Or that her endearingly human parents, no matter how non-judgmental, accept the news of her pregnancy so nonchalantly? And why doesn't anybody, including the father, respectfully ask the ever-sneering Juno her reasoning for having the baby and giving it up for adoption?

I lived in Minneapolis, where the film is set, in the early '90s, and every day on my way to work, I passed a women's clinic besieged by angry protesters determined to deny its patients access. It was no laughing matter, and regardless of your personal opinion, the clinicians, the patients and even the protesters **all deserve more complex, nuanced and thoughtful portraits than the simplistic and insulting caricatures drawn by screenwriter Diablo Cody.**

We can debate whether the message of "Juno" is anti-abortion and therefore anti-woman, despite its post-feminist surface. But given its sickly-sweet indie soundtrack, there's no arguing that the movie is anti-rock, at least if we still define rock as an honest expression of youthful rebellion.

We're encouraged to see Bateman/Jason Loring as hopelessly immature — unlike representations such as Seth Rogen in "Knocked Up", who responds to the unplanned pregnancy by turning from loser to SuperDad in the space of 90 minutes — because he bails on his obviously troubled marriage when he decides he isn't ready for fatherhood. His stunted growth is illustrated by the fact that he's nostalgic for alternative rock, and he regrets quitting his touring underground band to write commercial jingles.

In the end, in a topsy-turvy movie universe where the teen heroine struts like John Travolta in "Saturday Night Fever," clearing a path in her high school hallway with a pregnant belly she treats as the ultimate outsider status symbol, **Bateman's Loring actually can be seen as a more honest and genuinely rebellious character than Juno.**