

WONDER (2017)

Presented by the American Film Institute’s Silver Theater and Cultural Center

Educational Screenings Program

*Previewing Information*

WONDER is a great film for exploring how film can create empathy and give you a sense of what’s it’s like to be someone else. Despite being such a visual medium, film can excel at getting behind surface appearances. If you haven’t read the book, it’s better to see this film knowing as little as possible about the plot. (At AFI, we’ll give you some things to look for when you watch the movie.) So maybe wait until after the screening to consider the following review:

As he did with his insightful young adult drama “[The Perks of Being a Wallflower](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-perks-of-being-a-wallflower-2012),” (Stephen) Chbosky handles major adolescent events with decency and grace. The cumulative effect—as overly simplistic as it may sound – is the powerful understanding of what it feels like to walk in someone else’s shoes. The emotion of this enlightenment sneaks up on you in quiet ways. Even Wilson, whose character feels underwritten beyond providing comic relief during moments of family tension, gets perhaps the most heartbreaking, uplifting line in the whole film. You’ll shed a tear or two—especially if you’re a parent—and they’ll be totally earned.

All of which makes it so frustrating that “Wonder” throws that restraint and goodwill out the window in its finale and turns wildly sentimental. Chbosky cranks up the feel-good with a climax full of wild applause at the most clichéd place possible: a school assembly. How is it possible that so many cinematic moments of truth take place before a packed auditorium?

But the film does so much so well for so long that its pat conclusion feels forgivable. Early on during a screening of “Wonder,” when the film first reveals the scars and deformities that mark the hero’s face, my eight-year-old son turned to me and whispered, “He looks weird.” Once the movie was over, as we were walking out of the theater and I asked him what he thought, he exclaimed: “I loved it!” Such is the film’s transformative power. It is a machine for creating empathy.

by Christy Lemire on RogerEbert.com

How exactly did the film help you get to know Auggie? Do you agree with the reviewer that the conclusion is “wildly sentimental,” or do you think it is fitting? Why? How else might the film have ended? If you compare the beginning and the end of the film—like two bookends—how do they relate to one another? How does that comparison suggest how much Auggie’s world has changed in one school year?

*Film Terms*

Close-up: a shot showing detail only (e.g. face or hands only)

Establishing shot: a shot, taken from a distance, establishing for the viewer where the action will occur and the spatial relationship of the characters and their setting

Extreme Close-up: a detail of a close-up (e.g. eyes or mouth only)

Long Shot: a shot taken at considerable distance from the subject. A long shot of a person is one in which the entire body of the person is in frame.

Medium shot: a shot framing the subject at a medium range, usually a shot from the waist up

Reverse Cutting: a technique alternating over-the-shoulder shots showing different characters speaking. This is generally used in conversation scenes.

Two shot: a shot with two people in it. (yes, it’s really a term.)

Voiceover: when a scene is narrated by someone who is not shown speaking on screen

*Post-viewing Discussion*

1. If you have read the novel: in what ways is the film different? Why do you think those changes were made? How is the experience of watching a film different from that of reading a novel? What can each medium do that the other can’t?
2. What is the effect of the voiceover to narrate each character’s perspective? Which character did you find yourself empathizing with the most, and why? Which character’s inner emotions were most surprising to you, and why?
3. What is the significance of the astronaut helmet? What other references to science and outer space do you notice? List all that you can find, from Auggie’s room décor to his sister’s description of Auggie being the son/sun of the family—there are many. Why are they appropriate? What is their purpose?
4. In what scenes do you notice that the music plays a big role? How does it shape your emotional response?
5. Name another coming-of-age film that you’ve seen. In what ways is this film similar to it?
6. Name two of the precepts (rules to live by) that are mentioned in the film. When do we see someone acting according to each precept in the film? When have you noticed someone acting according to each precept in real life?

*Scene Analysis*

1. Watch [the opening scene](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YH1C6yH_nFM) to see how Auggie is introduced. Describe what information we get about him in each scene. Why does the filmmaker introduce him so gradually?
2. Watch the scene [My First Friend](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoL1epfoq-g) (Scene 3/9). See the “Film Terms” section for definitions of “reverse cutting” and “two shot.” When are each used? What is the effect? How does the camera help show that they are becoming friends?