

## The Edge of Adulthood

[Oscar Bentley](#) explores the importance of coming of age stories and why they are so compelling

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Image: Stacey Mindich Productions

“It’s about a girl who is on the cusp of becoming someone. A girl who may not know what she wants right now, and she may not know who she is right now, but who deserves the chance to find out”, says Campbell Alexander, a character in Jodi Picoult’s novel *My Sister’s Keeper*. Now, I can’t claim to have either read the novel, or even to have watched its screen adaptation, in fact, I’ve just spent ten minutes googling to try and find an apt quote to try and start this article off in a way that you have hopefully found at least borderline interesting. But bear with me for a moment, because I think it’s a quote that perfectly encapsulates coming of age.

Coming of age is a universal experience. Every person who has lived for so long has ‘come of age’, either literally or figuratively, as it marks the transition from child to adulthood. Different cultures and societies mark this passage differently: in the UK adulthood is generally considered to be 18 or 21, when most restrictions are lifted by law. Some religions mark it via ceremony: in Catholicism, children go through confirmation at around 11 years old, taking a ceremony in church to start their lives as adults. In Judaism, boys have a Bar Mitzvah ceremony at 13 years old, a ritual where they pledge to become responsible for their own actions, relieving their parents of that duty. Jewish girls have a similar Bat Mitzvah ritual at 12 (Orthodox) or 13 (Reform).

Poy Sang Long is a rite of passage ceremony that I think is particularly fascinating. Buddhist boys from the Shan group in Thailand, aged between seven and 14, take part in a yearly ceremony spanning three

days, initiating them properly into the Buddhist community. They dress up in standout costumes, wear bright makeup, and spend the entire three days being carried on the shoulders of their older male relatives. At the end they are ordained and begin their study in the monastery. The ceremony helps the boy's families amass merit, moving the family closer to achieving enlightenment. It's a ceremony all about finding your place spiritually, but also within your community. Finding your place in the world.

Imagine for a second that you're a storyteller. At heart, storytellers only ever tell one story: their own lives, trying to find out how they fit in. 'Write what you know' is a phrase as old as time. So, my storyteller, you'll surely see that coming of age stories are the perfect outlet for telling your story. Be it the book, the stage, or the screen, coming of age stories are compelling. In charting the change of a character figuring out their place in the world and how to find themselves, we can all relate.

Take *Dear Evan Hansen*, the current smash hit musical and critical darling of Broadway, collecting six awards at last year's Tonys including Best New Musical, one that, incredibly frustratingly for me at least, has still yet to announce its West End transfer. It tells the story of Evan Hansen, a teenager with social anxiety who sees a way to connect with the world after a fellow student dies by suicide. Evan, as with almost all coming of age protagonists, is flawed. His conflict is his inability to figure out how to interact with the world, feeling like an outsider. The song "Waving Through a Window" is Evan's anthem, summarising who he is at the beginning of the story; musing how long he can spend waving at the world through the window that strands him on the outside.

"When you're falling in a forest and there's nobody around / Do you ever really crash, or even make a sound?" is the lyric from "Waving Through a Window" which is really the crux of the musical. Evan is so desperate to make a sound that he fabricates an entire life, achieving what he's always dreamed of, before it all comes crumbling down. Unlike the rituals of Bar Mitzvah or Poy Sang Long however, there is no one singular rite of passage act that allows Evan to discover who he is; coming of age in reality is not a singular act but often a journey of personal growth which takes years. Evan's journey shows not only his psychological but his moral growth, as he transitions into adulthood. Through a series of events that build then deconstruct his character, Evan finally finds how he fits into his world. It's a journey that has clearly had a profound impact on its audience, selling out every show and propelling Evan Hansen role originator Ben Platt into stardom. People connect to it because it's a story about connection. It's human.

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*The Edge of Seventeen* is a coming of age comedy-drama which falls into the 'growing up is all about romance' and 'arguing with family' clichés which are often present, but reinvents these tropes into a fresh story. Set in the archetypal coming of age setting of high school, like classics *The Breakfast Club* and *Dazed and Confused* (and no wonder it's a common coming of age setting, as storytellers know it's a place where most people spend their formative years), it follows star Hailee Steinfeld's Nadine, another outsider, who's life becomes unbearable when her only friend begins dating her brother. At this "betrayal", Nadine flies off the hook and rebels, venting to her deadpan teacher who now becomes her only connection.

Nadine makes a huge mistake, which surprisingly leads to exactly what she desires, before she realises it's not what she wants at all. Like Evan, Nadine is a flawed protagonist, but rather than reveling in what she's always wanted as Evan does, Nadine decides against it. Evan and Nadine are looking for a connection, but her revelation is that she's always had it. Steinfeld herself puts it perfectly: "The Edge of Seventeen is a story of a girl trying to find connection and contact with anything and anyone. The most satisfying thing is watching her realise that it's been there all along."

*The Edge of Seventeen* may be a small scale film, and *Dear Evan Hansen* may have begun in not-for-profit regional theatre, but charting characters' coming of age isn't exclusively reserved for the indie

circuit. Harry Potter is perhaps the clearest example of blockbuster storytelling on the matter, but it's also the dominant theme of Star Wars. The original trilogy marked Luke's coming of age through learning of his place as a Jedi master, essentially a 'chosen one' narrative, but *The Last Jedi* subverts this and evolves Rey from (once again) the loner who doesn't know who she is to \*spoiler alert\* the revelation that she doesn't come from anywhere special, but is simply a 'normal person' fighting for the right thing. Kylo Ren also comes of age, stepping out from under his masters to find his place as a leader.

Director Rian Johnson describes Rey's coming of age as the crux of the story. "This is very much about Rey trying to figure out how she fits into all this, much like any of us as we're growing up, as we're transitioning from childhood into adulthood," Johnson says. "You're going meet people who you think are going help who don't. And help is also going to come from unexpected places." Audiences may love Star Wars because it's a galaxy-hopping space opera filled with sci-fi gadgets and epic fantasy, but just maybe they love it more because it's an incredibly personal story about discovering who you are.

Be it the high school setting of *The Edge of Seventeen* and *Dear Evan Hansen* or the entire galaxy of *The Last Jedi*, these are all intimate stories. All stories (well, all good stories at least) need character arcs and change, but coming of age stories exclusively chart change and personal growth while growing up. Sherlock may learn to open up to John and lower his guard to the world in *Sherlock*, but it isn't a coming of age: he's already emotionally grown up and knows exactly where he fits. Amir finally finding closure after adopting the son of his deceased friend-cum-brother figure who he betrayed as a child in Khaled Hosseini's excellent novel *The Kite Runner* however is, because it's not until that point that Amir's journey concludes that he finds his calling. It's a bildungsroman; he starts the novel at 12 and ends it in his 30s, but it's not until that point that he truly comes of age.

Coming of age stories resonate because they reflect things we have all felt, telling us something we didn't know about ourselves in the process. They feature outsiders because at some point most of us have felt like we're on the outside looking in. Such stories conclude on a resolution of meaning - providing hope for all those who have felt or still feel lost. As Evan Hansen puts it perfectly, "you will be found". **M**



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