

Woody Harrelson, Daniel Clowes, and our favorite films of Sundance 2017

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Wilson (Photo: Sundance)

Can a film be both bitterly, bitingly misanthropic and kind of cuddly?

***Wilson* (Grade: B)** gives it a good college try. The film is based on the 2010 graphic novel by Daniel Clowes, who helped adapt some of his earlier works into a pair of big-screen comedies, [Ghost World](#) and [Art School Confidential](#). With *Wilson*, he's again translated one of his prickly studies of modern alienation to the screen, but without Terry Zwigoff—a kindred spirit of despair and bilious humor—behind the camera. Instead, the project has been helmed by Craig Johnson, director of the recent Sundance favorite [The Skeleton Twins](#), and one can often sense it being pulled in divergent directions, toward the acid wit of its creator and toward something a little

more charitable, a little more Fox Searchlight-friendly.

An uptick in humaneness, and in palatability, was possibly inevitable; behavior that readers can stomach from a drawing, frozen in ink, might be a tougher sell in flesh-and-blood form. Johnson's strongest move was securing Woody Harrelson for the title role, an incorrigible windbag who lacks social boundaries, a filter between his mind and motor-mouth, and just about anyone willing to put up with him for longer than a few minutes. Harrelson doesn't shy away from Wilson's obnoxiousness—this is a guy who plants himself next to strangers on an empty bus, then berates them when they don't share his anticonformist worldview—but he does sand down some of his edges, lending an oddly likable quality to his gregarious assholery. Harrelson makes the character his own, irresistibly.

Wilson the book was structured as a series of one-page gag strips, capable of being enjoyed in isolation or as part of a larger narrative. That explains why *Wilson* the movie often plays like a punchline machine, dropping Harrelson into various situations/encounters and then cutting away on a caustic remark. So long as the film is operating in episodic fashion, the laughs land; Harrelson delivers each off-color joke and uncomfortably honest observation with a true-believer's zeal. The film is less satisfying when shaping the plot points of the source material—Wilson's search for his ex-wife (Laura Dern) and the daughter (Isabella Amara) he's never known—into something resembling a dramatic arc. Clowes fans may be vaguely disappointed. Harrelson fans will not.

Yesterday was my final day at Sundance, and I have regrets. This isn't uncommon. Everyone I know walks away from a festival wishing they had seen more movies or different movies or that one unmissable movie they somehow missed. Yours truly didn't sleep on anything *too* major—after all, I spent much of my time here in Park City rearranging my schedule to catch titles with good word of mouth, chasing hype down snowy mountain roads. But as usual, I do wish I had seen more documentaries. No, I'm not sure [the](#)

[Al Gore film](#) really qualifies.

Quest (Photo: Sundance)

One of the nonfiction films I *did* catch, **Quest (Grade: B)** follows a black family, the Rainey, in North Philadelphia for close to a decade, the election of Barack Obama and the end of his administration providing a rough, overarching framework. I say “rough,” because though Jonathan Olshefski includes the occasional hint of what’s going on nationally—there are no date stamps, just shots of televisions airing election coverage or footage of Hurricane Sandy or our new president making his crass appeal to black voters—*Quest* doesn’t really attempt overt connections between the personal and the political. Mostly, it just observes these ordinary Americans as they live their lives, weathering tragedies and making music in their home studio. Once again, the Steve James model of long-term filming commitments pays off: By the end of *Quest*, I felt melancholy about saying goodbye to the Rainey and sad that I wouldn’t know where their lives would go from here. There’s no such emotional kick, incidentally, to **78/52 (Grade: B-)**, a feature-length, highly conventional talking-head documentary about the famous shower scene from *Psycho*. The first half lays out Alfred Hitchcock’s classic in broad terms, placing the film in the context of his career and movie history; Hitchcock fans will find most of this information superfluous. But the film picks up when it gets down to shot-by-shot analysis, allowing editors and other interviewees to break down one of the most famous sequences in movie history.

There’s a documentary-like quality to **Beach Rats (Grade: B-)**, the last of the U.S. competition titles I caught at Sundance and the latest from Brooklyn-based festival alum Eliza Hittman. Like Hittman’s last movie, [It Felt Like Love](#), it’s a coming-of-age drama, set against the carnival nightlife and beaches of Coney Island. We tag along with Frankie (Harris Dickinson), a shiftless (and often shirtless) New Yorker teetering on the edge of adulthood, pickpocketing strangers with his Neanderthal buddies and entertaining the

possibility that he may be gay. Dickinson is quietly excellent in the lead role, conveying hints of the emotions that Frankie, immersed in his macho go-nowhere social circle, can't bring himself to articulate. But from the minute Hittman introduces the character's double life, *Beach Rats* becomes a long waiting game for the other shoe to drop—for things to go very bad for this closeted lug, for his experimentation to have dire consequences for *someone*. An impeccable sense of place and admirably stripped-bare shooting style can't quite make up for how dourly predictable the film turns out to be. Why does Hittman see sexual awakening as nothing but a one-way trip to misery?

And that's about it for me in Park City this year. From the outside and outset, Sundance '17 looked less instantly exciting than the average edition of the festival. There was no [Boyhood](#) or [Manchester By The Sea](#) on the docket; when Alex Ross Perry is among the most well-known filmmakers competing, you know the programmers haven't made household names as high of a priority as usual. But maybe that's how it *should* be at Sundance, a festival that was originally envisioned as an annual showcase for up-and-comers, not a haven for industry giants. Because I didn't have a new Richard Linklater or Kenneth Lonergan or Whit Stillman or Kevin Smith movie to see, I could take more chances on unknown quantities and filmmakers I'd written off in the past. That I liked or even loved several of the films I saw is proof that you can't judge a festival by its initial lineup. Below, I've selected my five favorites of Sundance. Most should be in American theaters by the end of the year. I'm excited for all of you to see them.

Thoroughbred (Photo: Sundance)

1. [A Ghost Story](#)

Nothing that writer-director David Lowery has made before (even his [Pete's Dragon](#) remake, which I liked) could prepare me for this bewitching and unclassifiable curiosity, shot over a few days on a nonexistent budget. Synthesizing his influences into something entirely singular, Lowery risks

ridicule by adopting the perspective of an apparition that's just a sheet with eyeholes cut into it; the being's silent loneliness and yearning becomes a jumping-off point for a larger study of love, death, time, memory, and the importance we put in the spaces we occupy. I suspect plenty will hate *A Ghost Story*, because it's slow and strange and very earnest. But I can also guarantee that we'll be talking about this movie all year.

2. [*Call Me By Your Name*](#)

Another surprise: Italian director Luca Guadagnino, whose [*A Bigger Splash*](#) and [*I Am Love*](#) left me cold, reemerges with an erotic, rapturous summer romance between a smart, sensitive teenager (Timothée Chalamet) and the handsome vacationing American (Armie Hammer) in town for the season. *Call Me By Your Name* acknowledges the extra caution a man and a boy would feel pursuing each other in 1983, but instead of treating that hesitation as a promise of danger, it becomes just another step in the slow, careful seduction process. The wine-and-dine classics of Éric Rohmer are an obvious influence, but Guadagnino moves to his own music—even when his lovers are dancing, joyously, to The Psychedelic Furs.

3. [*Thoroughbred*](#)

Amanda ([*Me And Earl And The Dying Girl*](#)'s Olivia Cooke) feels nothing. Lily ([*The Witch*](#)'s Anya Taylor-Joy) feels nothing but rage and resentment. Put them together and you get Cory Finley's ferociously funny directorial debut, which creates an unpredictable cocktail from the teenage reunion of two childhood best friends. Anchored by a pair of incredible lead performances, *Thoroughbred* was also one of the best-directed movies I saw at Sundance: stylish without showing off, using duration, composition, and razor-sharp editing for the purposes of comedy *and* suspense. Swirling at the film's center, like blood circling a drain, is a provocative suggestion: There are lots of unwell people out there, but only some know they're not well.

4. [*The Big Sick*](#)

[Silicon Valley](#)'s Kumail Nanjiani collaborated with his wife and podcast cohost, Emily V. Gordon, to retell the story of how they met, fell in love, and weathered an unusual ordeal, not necessarily in that order. What could have been pure navel-gazing instead becomes an enormously appealing comedy, perceptive about the cultural obstacles that stood in the way of this couple's happily-ever-after and, especially, the strange business of connecting with the parents of a significant other. *The Big Sick* also proves there's life left in the Apatow formula; the comedy mogul played hands-on producer for the project, making it the best movie he's been attached to since the one-two punch of [Knocked Up](#) and [Superbad](#) a decade ago.

5. [Columbus](#)

Film critic and video essayist Kogonada makes a gorgeous feature debut with this tale of two lonely strangers (John Cho and Haley Lu Richardson) bonding in the titular Midwest city, a friendship blossoming out of their conversations about life, relationships, and especially modern architecture. Even if you don't connect to the characters, the film's mood (regretful but not sorrowful), carefully conceived compositions (more reminiscent of Taiwanese cinema than American indie fare), and impeccable sense of place are hard not to admire. Kogonada is going places. His first movie makes me want to go to Columbus, Indiana.