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By CAROLINA DEL BUSTO
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YA Saves Summer: *If I Stay* Brings Feeling Back to the Multiplex

By **STEPHANIE ZACHAREK** Tuesday, Aug 19 2014

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Doane Gregory

Should grown-ups be spending their time reading young-adult novels, at the risk of missing the supposed riches of fiction written for actual grown-ups? A recent essay in *Slate* grouched about the legions of adults who long ago graduated from the 12th grade but still devour YA fiction at the expense of everything else. Now that so many YA novels are being turned into movies—this summer alone has brought us adaptations of John Green’s blockbuster *The Fault in Our Stars* and Lois Lowry’s much-loved 1993 *The Giver*—maybe we should be asking similar questions about film. Should real grown-ups be shelling out for, say, *Expendables 3*, or is it okay if they’re more attracted to *If I Stay*, R.J. Cutler’s movie version of Gayle Foreman’s 2009 novel about teenage tragedy, teenage love and, well, more teenage tragedy?

There’s no universal answer to that question, but it does point toward one of the more vexing problems of moviegoing culture as it’s reflected in the multiplex: Given the dearth of dramas about real-life grown-up problems, especially in summertime, movies adapted from young-adult novels are about the best we can hope for. Even when they’re not great, they fill a need, for teenagers and grown-ups alike. If you’re in the mood for a story about humans who are a little less expendable, you could do worse than spend an air-conditioned afternoon watching *If I Stay*.

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	20%	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles , \$28.4 mil
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	12%	Let's Be Cops , \$17.7 mil
	35%	The Expendables 3 , \$16.2 mil
	31%	The Giver , \$12.8 mil
	21%	Into the Storm , \$7.7 mil
	66%	The Hundred-Foot Journey , \$7.1 mil
		Lucy , \$5.3 mil
		Step Up All In , \$2.7 mil
		Hercules , \$2.1 mil

Chloë Grace Moretz plays Mia, a teenage rebel, though not the sort you'd expect: Her parents (Mireille Enos and Joshua Leonard) are former rock 'n' rollers who gave up the world of ear-splitting volume and cheap draft beer to raise their two kids—Mia's little brother is played by Jakob Davies—quietly and responsibly in a town not far from Portland. Mia loves music, too, but she's much more straitlaced than her parents: She's a disciplined cellist with dreams of attending Juilliard. The cutest and coolest guy in her school, an aspiring rock guitarist named Adam (Jamie Blackley), spies her practicing alone in a classroom one day, and *zing* go the strings of his heart. He asks her out to a classical concert, even though he's more of a Vampire Weekend guy. They begin dating, and Mia even takes tentative steps toward liking his band, which, thanks to Adam's considerable charms as a frontman, is edging closer and closer to a record deal (or what passes for one these days).

TRAILER



Doane Gregory



Doane Gregory

Details

If I Stay was directed by R.J. Cutler; written by Shauna Cross, based on the novel by Gayle Forman; and stars Chloë Grace Moretz, Jamie Blackley, Mireille Enos, Joshua Leonard and Stacy Keach.

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hyperfeelings with respect and sensitivity. It doesn't hurt that he has Moretz in his corner. At a certain point, *If I Stay* takes a maudlin turn and just keeps going. Somehow, though, Moretz is strong enough to carry it. She makes out-of-body Mia's excessive soul-searching seem wholly believable: There's a vulnerable softness to her eyes that suggests she really is thinking and feeling all the time, suspended in that gel of emotional turmoil we remember as teenagerhood. She's best, though, in a scene in which Mia describes to her best friend (Liana Liberato) how she feels when she's watching her boyfriend onstage, playing a type of music she doesn't even particularly like. "When he's up there," she says, "I just wanna lick the side of his face." Her lip curls into the faintest Joan Jett sneer—and you're never too old to understand what *that's* about.

But petty resentments can creep in, even when you're living the teenage dream. Plus, tragedy strikes, and it does so pretty early on: Mia and her family suffer a serious car accident, one that puts Mia in a coma. While flesh-and-blood Mia lies in a hospital bed, right at the crossroads of life and death, out-of-body Mia drifts around listlessly, reflecting on her recent past and asking herself the same question the Clash once posited: Should I stay or should I go?

It's the ultimate teenage fantasy, an extension of the "You'd be sorry if I died!" retort so beloved by melodramatic 15-year-olds everywhere. Imagine lying in a coma and having your on-again, off-again boyfriend tearfully creep to your bedside and say *amazing* things about how much he cares for you. He even writes a song just for you—something he'd never before done—and he sits by your bed and plays it for you on his guitar. It's kind of a crap song, but still!

There's something morbidly gratifying about the supercalifragilistically supernatural elements of *If I Stay*, even if the movie isn't ultimately as effective as it could be. The last third drags, as the list of tragic reasons for Mia to step toward that beckoning white light just grows and grows. But Cutler—who made the superb 2009 *Vogue* magazine documentary, *The September Issue*, which turned stylist supreme Grace Coddington into a sort-of household name—is hardly a bumbler, and he approaches all these teenage

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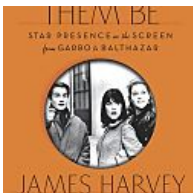
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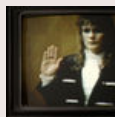
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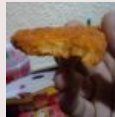
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