

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 164, No. 156

Serving Chicago's legal community for 163 years

## 'Eighth Grade' shows how modern-day teens bare their soul

Rather than reflect on own teendom in 2004, 28-year-old writer Burnham took to YouTube

No books. No television. No telephone calls. All communication with the outside world is conducted through a glowing rectangular prism — out-bound dispatches only.

This isn't a description of Matt Damon trapped on Mars or some dystopian Phillip K. Dick science-fiction. It's the life of a 13-year-old girl, Kayla Day (Elsie Fisher), during her last week of middle school, as depicted in writer-director Bo Burnham's "Eighth Grade."

Burnham, now 28, began his career as an absurdist calamity-comic, whose youthful fame was generated on YouTube. He said "Eighth Grade" is not based on his own personal narrative, but on research, which was shockingly easy to conduct because young teens publish their entire lives online.

Knowing that the experience of an eighth-grader today is dramatically different than when he was in middle school 15 years ago, he aimed to depict the lives of young teens here and now, not an adult's

nostalgic look backward.

So Burnham watched hundreds of videos posted by teenagers, a rich mine for research. He made the decision to write a script focusing on girls rather than boys, because boys' videos were mostly about games, while girls used YouTube to bare their souls.

Then too, Burnham had himself felt isolated, deep inside his head, when he was developing his

*The result of Burnham's great experiment is a moving, often painful portrait of an outsider in a world that is exquisitely, cosmically choreographed to exclude her.*

stand-up routines. His anxiety as a comic seemed mirrored by that of teen girls.

The result of Burnham's great experiment is a moving, often painful portrait of an outsider in a world that is exquisitely, cosmically choreographed to exclude her.

Kayla lives alone with her dad,



**REBECCA  
L. FORD**

*Rebecca L. Ford is counsel to Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at [rford@scharfbanks.com](mailto:rford@scharfbanks.com).*

Mark (Josh Hamilton). There are vague references to an absent mom, but we aren't told why or where she might be now.

Hapless Mark wants Kayla to be happy and safe. She shuts him out by keeping her earphones in and her music turned up high.

Solitary Kayla posts advice videos in the YouTube-sphere —

But her efforts to reach out are met by a stone wall of teen cliquedom. Popular girls cut her cold by gluing their eyes to their phones and scrolling determinedly while she is speaking to them.

Worse, she is voted "most quiet" when class superlatives are handed out on awards day.

Burnham tunes into the velocity of technological turnover as high schoolers, only four years older, are amazed that Kayla had Snapchat in the fifth grade and assume that she received nudes as an 11-year-old.

She is beginning to get the idea that she can barter sex for attention. But she is not ready to be tested, and we see how quickly sexual curiosity can be flipped and weaponized into sexual coercion.

Fisher, 15, who began voice acting at age 5 as Agnes in "Despicable Me," successfully carries "Eighth Grade" by endowing Kayla with a believable balance of angst and transparent bravado.

Although the film seems to target 13-year-olds, "Eighth Grade" has an R rating. Burnham didn't try to pare down its explicit language to win a PG, "because eighth-graders lead R-rated lives."

He said his film is for everyone and hopes that parents will see the movie with their children — while sitting on opposite sides of the theater.

Perhaps no one will be more surprised by the miseries and mysteries of middle school than such well-meaning adults.

Even so, with all its heartbreaking awkwardness and discomfort, "Eighth Grade" ends on a hopeful note: High school awaits.