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# Matt's Holiday Rom-Com Breakdown: The Good, The Bad, The Ugly

Matt Parks, Staff Reporter

There are the movies that we love, movies that define us and movies that change us. And then, there are Christmas and Holiday movies. Yes—it's that time of year again when we indulge in a slew of movies that are less than memorable and follow the same old cookie-cutter formats.

It is a principle rule that in holiday romantic-comedy Christmas movies that the leads must fall in love by the end of the movie. In the movies I watched for the sake of this review, all follow this rule. The degree to which they are entertaining varies and I have ranked them below primarily on the movie's overall quality and secondly on their Christmas spirit, marked on a Christmas Tree rating scale. Lastly, I have rated the films on their diversity as it's been a long-held fact that Hallmark and Lifetime films feature extremely non-diverse casts and characters.

#5 – The Sweetest Christmas (Hallmark, 2017)

Christmas Tree Rating: 4/10

Diversity: 1/10

Spoiler: It's about a carousel. After a bitter start in which an expected proposal becomes a promotion, Kylie (Lacey Chabert) throws herself in the American Gingerbread Competition where she finds out that she's made the finals. But there's one problem: she needs an oven since the one she's using is in need of repair, so she turns to her childhood love who's the owner of a restaurant.

The movie is palatable. Chabert is charming but opposite Lea Coco's Nick—the pair is not the most likable and lack the over-the-top signature chemistry of Hallmark films. Even the earnestness of Hallmark characters to make their world seem real, even when it's obviously too jolly, is not a relief but more jarring. This movie has the potential to be good. It has clever aspects, but there's an 11th-hour plot twist that comes from virtually nowhere that only hurts the movie's conclusion.

#4 – “The Christmas Edition” (Lifetime, 2020)

Christmas Tree Rating: 6/10



Rachel Bentfield

Diversity: 8.5/10

An eager, hard-working journalist, Jackie (Carly Hughes) decides to quit her job after her talent is failed to be recognized, and on a whim, heads to a small Alaskan town to lead an all-but-dead local newspaper. Jackie is strictly business and initially ignores the town's celebration of Christmas, intent upon following a journalist's number one rule: never make the story about yourself. But as time goes on, Jackie learns more about the town's charms through the owner of the local newspaper, Finn (Rob Mayes), and in the process, they foster a connection.

It's here that Jackie figures out how to save the newspaper by making Christmas editions, which reflect the spirit of the town. By the end of the film, Jackie has turned the newspaper into a success and is rewarded with her dream offer. As a staple of Christmas rom-coms, she has fallen in love with Finn and the lifestyle there by this time, so her decision is conflicted—will she choose the life she's always imagined or follow her heart?

The movie is palatable—the leads have chemistry, even if the cheesy flirting and tension is the level of a teen rom-com, a reminder that we never leave high school. For a movie about journalism, it's fairly well-written even if you can predict the end of their sentences. The bigger wonder of the film is how a small Alaskan town has this many people, plus enough that are willing to help with different Christmas events and festivities. The film serves as a reminder that just because you know the ending doesn't mean the ride will be unenjoyable.

#3 – “Holidate” (Netflix, 2020)

Christmas Tree Ranking: 2/10

Diversity: 2.5/10

“Holidate” finds Sloane (Emma Roberts), the only single member of her family, forced to endure relentless jokes at her expense and a seat at the childrens' table at her family's Christmas party. It's there that Sloane's bawdy Aunt Susan (Kristin Chenoweth) introduces her to the idea of a Holidate—a date for the holiday with no strings attached. The following day when trying to return items at the mall, the movie's two leads meet, and after some resistance, Jackson (Luke Bracey) becomes Sloane's holidate. From there, we go through a year's worth of holidays (the film bookends on Christmasses) that are not without disasters, including a trip to the hospital on Fourth of July and a medication mix-up on Halloween.

Holiday rom-com lovers will be fans of this film, which features the usual tropes of overbearing families, existentialism, run-ins with an ex-boyfriend and mundane moments that suddenly become emotional. There's even a scene in which Emma Roberts makes fun of rom-coms and the two reenact the famous lift from “Dirty Dancing.” The movie works because it doesn't take itself too seriously, a pattern that makes Hallmark movies insufferable. That's not to say that this movie is without deep flaws; there's an overload of sex-related jokes and sexism—but it also tries a reversal of gender stereotypes, even though that does not excuse the sexism throughout. While “Holidate” is a new take on an old genre, it is offset with problematic jokes and premise. It's filled with imperfections, but isn't that all we can ask of a holiday rom-com?

#2 – “Love Hard” (Netflix, 2021)

Christmas Tree Ranking: 6/10

Diversity: 7/10

Take “How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days”, mix it with “The Proposal,” set it at Christmas time and you've got “Love Hard.” Natalie Bauer (Nina Dobrev) is a L.A. journalist who writes a column about her failed romantic encounters and she's got a boss who profits off her love disasters. When she's about to give up on love, she makes a match on an online dating app “Flirt Alert” with what she thinks is her perfect guy. Then when he wishes she were able to join him for Christmas in a small upstate New York town, she jumps at the offer. Her boss is convinced it will lead to her biggest disaster yet, but Natalie is driven to prove him wrong.

Then there's the reveal: Natalie has been catfished and Josh Lin (Jimmy O. Yang) has used the photos of Tag (Darren Barnett) on his dating profile. But the two decide to team up; Josh will teach Natalie how to get Tag if she pretends to be his girlfriend for Christmas. What follows is a fun, laughable and—at times—touching film that is ultimately about honesty and identity and the recognition that who we are is more valuable than the person we wish to be.

#1 - "Let it Snow" (Netflix, 2019)

Christmas Tree Ranking: 6/10

Diversity: 9/10

Adapted from the novel by John Green, Maureen Johnson and Lauren Myracle, this holiday film follows a group of high schoolers as they navigate their friendships and love lives during a snowstorm. The film is shot to resemble mini-vignettes interwoven together that grasp the messiness the holidays can incite. It's also the best written film that I reviewed.

Admittedly, it takes a minute for this film and the actors to find their stride, but once they do, it becomes thoroughly enjoyable to watch. There are some great scenes and lines in the film—the biggest highlight is a culturally inclusive Christmas ceremony. Joan Cusack delightfully plays the Tin Foil Woman, a tow truck driver, with surprising wisdom and her role takes a fun turn at the film's end.

Is there off-key singing? Nerdy dancing? A car chase in the snow? A new view of the power of snow? All of the above. But all's well that ends well is the film's overarching theme. The movie is ultimately a coming of age story wrapped in a snowstorm on Christmas Eve, and it's a worthwhile watch for the holidays.