



Billy the Kid Discussion Guide

Director: Jennifer Venditti

Year: 2007

Time: 84 min

You might know this director from:

This is the first full-length feature from this director.

FILM SUMMARY

Our teenage years are often turbulent, tumultuous times that most of us recall well—our hormones are raging, our bodies are changing, and the butterflies of first love are dancing in our stomachs. Director Venditti was working as a casting director looking for local talent for a friend’s short film when she first came across Billy in his high school cafeteria in a small town in Maine. Something about Billy struck a chord with her, and she felt compelled to capture the life of this awkward and unique teenager. In her cinema vérité debut feature documentary, Venditti provides an intimate look at a week in the life of BILLY THE KID.

Besides a few comments from Penny, Billy’s gentle and nurturing mother, Billy takes center stage. He does all the talking, running, bike-riding, contemplating, air-guitaring, lip-synching, and first-loving for which 15-year-olds are known. But Billy is not your normal 15-year-old; he’s a black sheep. With his hair long, his jeans high, and his heart on his sleeve, Billy takes us to the cliffside of adulthood and is both crushed and confused when his peers refuse to embrace him. But rather than changing, altering, or reassessing the way he carries on, he just keeps on keeping on with inspiring confidence.

BILLY THE KID is the story of awkward adolescence, of what it means to not conform, and—as we learn only by following up on the film—is a true picture of living with Asperger’s syndrome. At times too good to be true, and with Billy quite often too true to be good, this film—his film—is a heartbreakingly human tale, something we can all connect with once we disconnect from the humdrum of normalcy.

FILM THEMES

Billy lives his life in an unabashedly alternative way and, as is the case with many teenagers, his peers sideline, misunderstand, and outcast him. However, the brief glimpse into his daily life and thoughts strikes a chord with viewers, speaking to many universal experiences.

THE OUTSIDER

Billy wants what most of us want: to be loved, included, and accepted in the world. Yet, the way that he carries himself, his gestures and inflections, the way he wears his jeans, and the words he strings together don't follow the norm. By not conforming to society's standards he stands out, and his peers mock him for it. Teenage years are an awkward time, and the unspoken set of rules among peers can be difficult to navigate. Yet, he is true to his internal voice, and at times oblivious to the machine of the masses conforming around him. Billy symbolizes the power of the individual, rather than adjusting his behaviours and impulses based upon what is expected of him.

IMAGINATION

The process of coming of age in the Western World involves replacing childhood imagination with adult logic. Billy was an intelligent, well-read young man. He was also in possession of a vivid imagination, living his life at times in a dream-like state, often making statements like "I'd like to be a superhero." By maintaining the fertility of his creative mind and by not adjusting or melding into the norm, Billy presents a powerful case for the spectacular possibilities offered by imagination. If we keep dreaming, the world remains a place of fantastic possibility and hope.

FIRST LOVE

Most of us have experienced the exhilarating throes of first love, riding the roller-coaster of emotions leading up to that first kiss and that first exchange of romantic feelings with another person. What Billy and Heather experience, albeit in fast-motion, is universal. Through Billy's depth and manner in which he interacts with the world, we witness his experience of being unleashed and exposed in the face of these new feelings. He provides a reflection of arguably the most universal experience of all, perfectly summed up in his own words: "When I'm near her, I feel like I'm on a cloud."

LIVING WITH ASPERGER'S

Although it was after the filming was complete that Billy Price was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome—an autism spectrum disorder—and director Venditti never intended nor desired to highlight Billy as being afflicted or different, his medical diagnosis is worth mentioning. For many individuals who have been misunderstood and sidelined for not fitting in or appearing "normal," Billy provides hope and connection. By allowing Billy an unobstructed opportunity to express himself and doing away with anyone other than his mother's insights, Venditti provides a pure depiction of an individual living with a disorder that impacts many families.

“Sometimes you have to be hurt a little to know the truth.”

Billy Price

“All this time I thought my brain and imagination was a scary place. I realize now that the whole world's the scary place.”

Billy Price

“Sometimes life can be a pain in the butt, but still it's worth it. Usually you find great things inside the life that's a pain.”

Billy Price

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What was your initial impression of BILLY THE KID? How would you describe Billy Price in five words?
2. Discuss your time in high school. Were you popular, an outsider, a loner, etc.? Why do you think children are so prone to categorize and label everyone into groups? Do we continue to do this as adults, or is this something we outgrow?
3. Discuss your thoughts on Jennifer Venditti’s style of filmmaking. Do you think she exposed too much of Billy, or did she allow him to tell his own tale in a fair and just manner?
4. Have you ever known someone with Asperger’s syndrome or any other autism spectrum disorder? What knowledge/experience do you have with these behavioral disorders?
5. What, if any, parallels did you see between Billy’s experience of first love and your own? What about his first encounter with love was universal?
6. How did Billy’s relationship with his mother inform his relationship with Heather?
7. Do you consider yourself more of a conformist or individualist? Discuss. What about your decision to follow one of these two life paths has been difficult and what has been rewarding?
8. Do you consider yourself to have a healthy imagination? Do you think that it important to maintain a sense of imagination throughout one’s life, or is it more important to be grounded in facts?
9. Director Venditti has a background in the fashion world. Was this apparent to you in the film?
10. What role did music play in the film? What role did music play in your teenage years?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- When **BILLY THE KID** was released in 2007, it met with critical claim, scooping up a number of awards, including Best Documentary at the Los Angeles Film Festival and from the SXSW Competition Awards.
- Director Jennifer Venditti studied in Chicago at the Academy of Fashion Design and Merchandising, and then moved to New York City, where she has primarily worked as a casting director. While casting for a friend’s short film entitled “Bugcrush,” Venditti went to a high school to find characters for the film, which is when she first came across Billy Price. **BILLY THE KID** was filmed in 8 days.
- Since 1998, Venditti has run JV8INC in New York, an agency working on commercials, fashion editorials, and shows. In her words, “This was my opportunity to expand people’s ideas of beauty... the whole ethos behind [JV8INC] is to counter the typical way we’re taught to see beauty.”
- When she first met Billy Price, Venditti asked students and teachers at the school to describe him. Unsatisfied with their characterizations of him as different, weird, and an outsider, she was determined to display him in the film on his own terms, without the use of categories or labels. Only after the film was finished was Billy diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome.
- Another well-known Billy the Kid was William H. Bonney, a Wild West outlaw from the mid-1800s.
- Director of photography Donald Cumming was also the lead singer in NYC band The Virgins.
- **BILLY THE KID** was set in Lisbon Falls, Maine, a town with an estimated population of 4,100. Billy Price was living with his mother Penny, stepfather Paul, and brother Ethan. Lisbon High School, which Billy attended, was also attended by Stephen King. Lisbon Falls is located near Brunswick, where Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” in 1851.
- Asperger’s syndrome is a form of autism—or autism spectrum disorder (ASD)—that impacts a person’s communication and socialization abilities. It was first described in 1944 by Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger. While most individuals with more acute autism appear aloof and uninterested in human interactions, those with Asperger’s are eager to interact but find it difficult to understand conventional social rules, appearing awkward and sometimes inappropriate. Some common signs of Asperger’s include obsessive interests, peculiar speech patterns, social isolation, and delayed motor skills.
- An estimated 1 in 68 children in the U.S. are born with one form of ASD, and around 3.5 million Americans were living with an ASD as of 2014.
- **BILLY THE KID** film editor Enat Sidi has also edited acclaimed documentaries “Jesus Camp,” “The Boys of Baraka,” and “Detropia.”

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Challenge** Day is an organization providing workshops and support to teens, in order to provide children a world in which they “feel safe, loved and celebrated.” Learn more about their work [online](#).
2. **Visit [Wrong Planet](#)**, a web community for individuals with autism, Asperger’s syndrome, and other neurological differences. It is a great forum for anyone either directly or indirectly affected by these disorders.
3. **Visit [Tony Attwood’s website](#)**. Attwood, an Asperger’s specialist, offers helpful information and links.
4. **Celebrate** what makes you different from others, rather than focusing on conforming. By embracing each individual’s unique traits, the world is a richer and more tolerant place for us all.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.