

# New Netflix film "To All the Boys" is a love story starring Asian-Americans

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Lana Condor attends Netflix's special screening of "To All the Boys I've Loved Before," in which she plays the lead, at Arclight Cinemas on August 16, 2018 in Culver City, California. Photo by: Charley Gallay/Getty Images for Netflix

"Crazy Rich Asians," in theaters nationwide, is turning heads as the first Hollywood studio film in a quarter-century to feature an entirely Asian-American cast.

Riding on its coattails is a lesser-known film showing Hollywood's effort to embrace a variety of cultures: a Netflix high school romantic-comedy ("rom-com" for short) with a female Asian lead. "To All the Boys I've Loved Before" hit the streaming site on August 17.

The Netflix movie stars Vietnamese-American actress Lana Condor as Lara Jean Covey. She is an introverted high school junior who faces a major problem when the love letters she wrote – but never intended to send – are mysteriously delivered to every boy she has had a crush on.

## Characters' Ethnicity Not Essential To The Story

"To All the Boys" is based on the Young Adult book by Jenny Han. It is a sweet, engaging fictional story that follows a slew of other rom-coms released by Netflix, including "Set it Up," "When We First Met" and "The Kissing Booth."

This isn't a boundary-pushing story, but it's still enjoyable and worth the watch (despite the fact that 29-year-old Janel Parrish plays Lara Jean's 18-year-old sister, Margot). It's made for a quiet Friday night in, set in a world with stereotypical mean girls and social media buzzwords.

In terms of representation of an under-portrayed culture, though, it's a pretty big deal. Aside from "Crazy Rich Asians," "To All the Boys" is one of Hollywood's few rom-coms with an Asian lead. It's also a story about a young woman whose ethnicity isn't crucial to the plot. In fact, the only time race is ever really acknowledged is a few passing comments during a viewing of the 1980s movie "Sixteen Candles" (more on that later).

The hype surrounding "Crazy Rich Asians" is important because it suggests the public has an appetite for stories about various cultures. "To All the Boys" is important because it reminds us cultural exposés aren't the only stories that should be told about people of color.

"People didn't understand why the main character needed to be Asian," Han said in a statement from Netflix about turning her book into a film. "I explained to them that it wasn't that she needed to be Asian, it's that she was. ... There doesn't need to be 'a point' to her being Asian. She just is."

## A Universal Love Story Starring Asian-Americans

At its core, "To All the Boys" is a love story – between Lara Jean and a boy, yes, but also between Lara Jean and her family and Lara Jean and herself. It's a story that sets up a flawed and lovable three-dimensional character. She constantly contradicts herself. There's a sizable gap between the person she is and the person she wants to be.

"It's important for Asian-American kids to see themselves in stories and to feel seen," Han said. "They need to know that their stories are universal too, that they too can fall in love in a teen movie. They don't have to be the sidekick, they can be the hero. I've never seen an Asian-American character like Lara Jean in a movie before – sweet, quirky, funny and just herself."

Meanwhile, the nationwide theatrical release of "Crazy Rich Asians," as director Jon Chu said, "sends a very strong message that a Hollywood studio that brands things as special and worth your time to fight against traffic and parking and getting into a theater" is behind the film. "It says that we are worth your time and your energy."

## A Far Cry From Long Duk Dong

Netflix's release of "To All the Boys" sends a similar message to a younger audience. The accessibility of Netflix, as well as the young-adult audience targeted for this film, means roles for people of different races and cultures – specifically Asian roles – can become the new normal for a younger generation. These young viewers already enjoy shows like ABC's family sitcom "Fresh Off the Boat" (which also stars Constance Wu of "Crazy Rich Asians") and the recently ended romantic sitcom "The Mindy Project," starring Mindy Kaling.

In a scene in which Lara Jean and her other sister, Kitty, watch "Sixteen Candles" with her boyfriend, Peter, he asks, "Isn't this character, Long Dong Duck, like, kind of racist?"

"Not 'kind of.' Extremely racist," Lara Jean says.

It's a quick conversation, but it makes an important point. Hollywood has come far in the 34 years since the face of Asian representation in rom-coms was "Long Duk Dong," a racist, unrealistic character used as comic relief. The fact Lara Jean is rare among Asian female romantic lead characters proves there's still a long way to go.

However, movies like "To All the Boys" and "Crazy Rich Asians" makes for a solid start. Plus, there's news Netflix has another rom-com with Asian leads in the works.