

If Beale Street Could Talk Review: Barry Jenkins' Heartfelt Tome

If Beale Street Could Talk is a devastating yet warm snapshot of the African American experience from Barry Jenkins.

[David Crow](#) September 10, 2018



Photo: Annapurna Pictures

At a film festival, or really any movie house, most pictures are destined to be immediately analyzed for meaning and intent. Others are simply enjoyed (or not) due to the effectiveness of their escapism. And then there are those that are *felt*, down to your bones and the very marrow beneath. Barry Jenkins' ***If Beale Street Could Talk*** is such a lucid cinematic tome. To be

sure, it clearly demands analysis and much thought long after its running time is over, but the soul of the picture is what lingers like a wistful memory of times gone by. Or those that have been forcibly taken away.

As Jenkins' first feature after *Moonlight* won a Best Picture Oscar, the filmmaker has used the opportunity afforded by Hollywood accolades to adapt the long underrepresented author James Baldwin to the screen. Pulling from the 1974 novel of the same name, Jenkins' movie turns the page to a specific time and place in 1970s Harlem that, by its very nature, could just as easily apply to the America of today. For the Beale Street the title refers to is neither in Harlem or New York City. Rather it's a path down in Memphis immortalized by a W.C. Handor blues ballad. And like this new lyrical film, Baldwin saw no difference between the Big Easy and the Big Apple; in terms of the African American experience, the love story at the heart of *If Beale Street Could Talk* can and will occur anywhere.

An ostensibly simple tale, *Beale Street* recounts the romance between Tish Rivers (KiKi Layne) and Alonzo "Fonny" Hunt (Stephan James), a young couple who've known each other all their lives, growing from childhood friends to sweethearts. They even are to be parents of a newborn on the way. It is all so remarkably natural and healthy that when the world around them also treats their ultimate destinies as the natural order of things, it transcends mere tragedy and becomes something profoundly more debilitating. As the film drifts along its narrative chronology, moments of bliss are ever counterpointed with the fallout of Fonny being accused by a cop of raping a woman on the other side of town. Despite being demonstrably untrue, he is abandoned into the system as a pregnant Tish picks up the pieces of their life, including from the memories of her past, the splintered family of her present, and the child that is to be everyone's future.

Reminiscent of *Moonlight* before it, Jenkins' film is not as concerned with

the plotting of its tale as it is with the emotional truth undergirding it. With a visual essayist quality, he uses the vast landscape of 1974 Manhattan, and all the people in Tish and Fonny's lives, to paint an intimately precise portrait of a love story interrupted, and how no one is at all surprised about the turn of its direction. Unlike *Moonlight*, *Beale Street* is a more straightforward endeavor, allowing Tish to narrate much of the film's developments as her due date grows ever closer, and Fonny's court date is ever postponed. However, even as she is speaking her own truth, Jenkins' screenplay pulls from Baldwin's prose for her words, allowing Tish to see beyond the lone vantage of embattled heroine. By assuming the role of omnipotent narrator, she becomes both spectator and participant of her fate, which unfolds with a natural inevitability. Along the way, the film reaches moments of poetic transcendence, such as how Tish experiences losing her virginity, or Fonny taking her to the dilapidated loft he wishes to buy.

Within this context, Jenkins is able to address a wider range of issues facing Black America than his more acutely focused previous effort. Offering a kind of impressionistic snapshot of Tish and Fonny's world, we are able to discern the decades-long friendships of their families (and tension) when Tish's supportive parents convene a meeting to reveal she's pregnant. At this moment, Fonny is already in jail, and the suspicions and acrimony within the community is encapsulated by Fonny's mother's cruel condescension earned after a lifetime in the church pew and in her straightened hair. It is an agonizing moment that speaks volumes, complete with tremendously humane performances from all involved.

As the anchor of the piece, KiKi Layne is revelatory as the young woman caught between bliss and despair during what is supposed to be a happy moment. Her experiences and unnerving calm provides the movie with a centered ethereal quality despite its potentially beleaguering subject matter. She is also well matched by James, who plays a man described as "escaping

the Death" in all the forms it comes in for young black men. Nevertheless, he is drawn toward an abyss. The entire ensemble, however, also provides moments of humanity and warmth, such as Regina Hall as the happy grandmother-to-be who is able to persuade a law firm to represent Fonny pro bono, yet faces nigh insurmountable obstacles when confronted by other people the system has failed. Bryan Tyree Henry as Fonny's old friend with nightmares of his own two-year trap in the justice system can tease the horrors on the inside, and the hatred it perpetuates, while never betraying the picture's solemn grace.

Through this series of smaller vignettes, Jenkins crafts an ultimately epic portrait of love, loss, racism, and a system shrouded in an ambiguity deeper than black or white. His gliding camera finds good and ill, kindness and malevolence, in all walks of life. The final verdict can be of cold comfort, but it's engraved in the warm and benevolent light of unshakable truth.

If Beale Street Could Talk premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and opens in theaters on Nov. 29.

David Crow is the Film Section Editor at Den of Geek. He's also a member of the Online Film Critics Society. [Read more of his work here](#). You can follow him on Twitter [@DCrowsNest](#).

Rating:

5 out of 5

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David Crow is the movies editor at Den of Geek. He has long been proud of his geek credentials. Raised on cinema classics that ranged from...

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