

# Heathers

USA | 1988 | 103 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Michael Lehmann
<b>Screenplay</b>	Daniel Waters
<b>Photography</b>	Francis Kenny
<b>Music</b>	David Newman

## Cast

<b>Veronica</b>	Winona Ryder
<b>J.D.</b>	Christian Slater
<b>Heather (Duke)</b>	Shannen Doherty
<b>Heather (McNamara)</b>	Lisanne Falk
<b>Heather (Chandler)</b>	Kim Walker

## In Brief

Veronica Sawyer is part of the most powerful clique at Westerberg High and she's only a junior – so why isn't her life perfect? She is ambivalent about her friends (the Heathers of the title) and feels she's squandering her talents on petty pranks, obnoxious jocks and stupefying parties. When JD transfers to her school, there is an immediate attraction and he changes her life immediately but is it for the better?

This acerbic high school satire cemented the careers of Winona Ryder and Christian Slater as the newest hot teen stars... that they ultimately failed to live up to this has nothing whatsoever to do with this film. If at school you didn't dream of getting rid of obnoxious classmates, although perhaps by less drastic means employed in this picture, the chances are someone was dreaming this about you. Even today Heathers' spin on cliques, teen suicide, homosexuality and clueless adults still has bite.

A prescient, blackly comic satire on the effect that school cliques have on youth that can't seem to fit in, Heathers would jokingly refer to teen angst having a body count. At the time of the film's release back in 1989, it was a funny notion, until teen angst really would have a body count a decade later in places like Columbine, along with other copycat incidents, and we began to realize that it was not a joke anymore.

The setting is suburban Ohio, where Veronica Sawyer (Ryder, Beetlejuice) is a lucky member of the clique of girls who are the most popular in school. All pretty and from well-to-do families – they have the easy life. Unlike the other three girls, all of whom are named Heather, Veronica wasn't always part of the clique, once considered a bit of a geek herself. To some extent, she still isn't, as the Heathers are mean to the less-fortunate, conceited, spoiled, and manipulative even to each other. She detests being part of the clique, and yet, it affords her a certain protection from ridicule that the nerdy, smart girls all experience.

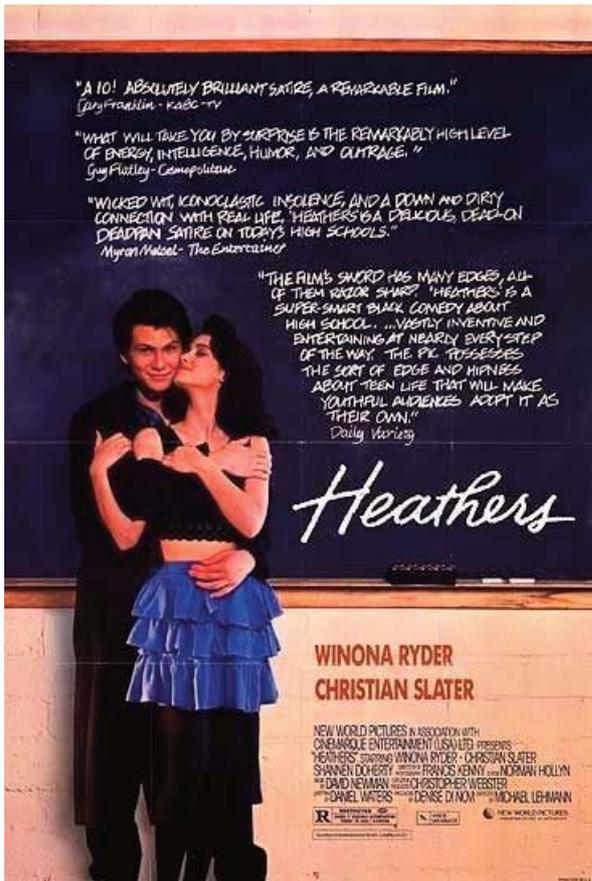
When a newcomer to the school, a troubled nonconformist named J.D. (Slater, True Romance), shows a lack of concern for the established order of things, Veronica finds a strange attraction. The two join together in a prank to get revenge on lead Heather (Walker, A Reason to Believe) for threatening to humiliate Veronica, but the plan goes awry, resulting in Heather's death. J.D. and Veronica conspire to cover it up as a suicide, although this causes certain consequences, as suicide becomes a fashionable thing to do, since Heather Chandler had been the most emulated and admired girl in school, perhaps more so after her death. Soon after, J.D. tricks Veronica into engaging in a double homicide of more students that are making her life miserable, also trumped up as suicides. She tries to distance herself from J.D. and his psychopathic ways, but he's not willing to let go, even threatening to kill her if she won't join in his fun by destroying the status quo of the fabric of high school life.

Despite the small budget of only \$2 million, Heathers didn't find its audience in the theater when released, barely earning even half of its shooting budget back. It was unlike any teen comedy that had come out before, with its jet black humor, odd characters, and graphic violence. Over time, the film found its proper audience on video and cable showings, and the film especially resonated with alienated youth, who recognized a truth somewhere underneath the outlandish occurrences depicted in the film. Unlike previous teen films, this wasn't about trying to do whatever one could to become the popular girl or guy in school – it was a complete rejection of the notion of popularity through conformity.

For all of its resonance and influence on teen movies that still continue to be felt today, Heathers is much more of a cult classic than a true classic. It's definitely an ambitious endeavor, and like most new, ambitious projects, it misses the mark sometimes in quality, as first-time director Michael Lehmann (40 Days and 40 Nights, Airheads) tries to find the proper tone for first-time screenwriter Daniel Waters' (Batman Returns, Demolition Man) crazy characters, sometimes resulting in scenes more strange than humorous. (Trivia:



# Heathers



Daniel Waters' younger brother, Mark, would go on to direct the very Heathers-influenced, Mean Girls). Despite their lack of experience, Heathers would eventually be considered one of the most notable films of the 1980s. The two would later collaborate once again two years later on one of the most critically lambasted films of the 1990s, the Bruce Willis mega-turkey, Hudson Hawk.

Perhaps the most significant thing about Heathers is that how it was a satire on things before its time. It's hard to watch Heathers today without thinking of Columbine, with its misfit outcast clad in a trench coat out to kill his peers with a hell-fueled inner rage that no one can quite understand, save perhaps the teens that actually would follow in J.D.'s unfortunate footsteps. The film's final scene has J.D. hatching his ultimate plan to kill the entire school, which had been foreshadowed by one metalhead high schooler's statement early in the film that the way he'd like to die is to stick a remote control bomb up a lion's butt so that when he pushes the button, he and the lion would die like one. J.D. takes it a step further by making his violent act a political statement to the rest of the world that high school, like the rest of society, is all out of whack. If they can't live as one, they shall certainly die as one.

Whenever teen tragedies like Columbine strike, people sometimes question, "Where are the parents?". It's ironic that one of J.D.'s parents is dead while the other engages in an anti-parent ritual where he and his son perform role reversals, allowing his child to go through with his life with the autonomy of an adult, but none of the responsibility or accountability. Meanwhile, J.D.'s unwitting accomplice, Veronica, does have parental presence, but they are clearly out of touch with what she's going through. Veronica habitually calls her father an idiot, which he accepts with a touch of humor, and perhaps truth, while her mother hasn't a clue just what to think about her daughter's unhappiness, thinking that the teens of today are treated like the human beings

they are, and doesn't see what the complaining is about.

As a backlash to the teen comedies that were so popular throughout the 1980s, particularly by John Hughes, Heathers showed us that high school is not such a fun, happy place for those not a cheerleader, star jock, or a member of the popular clique. It's a world of exclusion and cruelty, where those that look or act different are not only kept from associating with the popular crowd, but are actually sought out for constant ridicule in front of their peers. If Heaven is, as J.D. states, "the only place where different social types can genuinely get along", then high school must surely embody the opposite of Heaven – pure Hell.

- Vince Leo

EDINBURGH  
FILM  
GUILD

Teenage Riot