

Bird Review: Andrea Arnold's magical-realist ode to nature soars

Bird is a poignant coming-of-age drama following Bailey (Nykiya Adams), a guarded young girl navigating her chaotic home life. While not without the grit and violence of director Andrea Arnold's usual 'kitchen sink' realism, Bird marks a shift to something more fantastical through its titular character (Franz Rogowski); a highly enigmatic, pixieish figure who falls somewhere between a guardian angel and figment of Bailey's imagination.



Bailey (Left) and Bug (Right). Image screenshot from film; all rights reserved to Mubi

Living in a graffiti-strewn squat in Gravesend, Kent, twelve-year-old Bailey has an alienating relationship with her family. Her young father Bug (Barry Keoghan) is funding his wedding to new girlfriend Kayleigh using the psychoactive secretions of a Colombian drug toad. Her older brother Hunter (Jason Buda) is affiliated with a vigilante gang and has plans to run away with his newly-pregnant girlfriend. Across town, Bailey's three younger siblings live with their mum and her abusive boyfriend. Acknowledged, but never truly seen, Bailey's perspective starts to change when she crosses paths with Bird and helps him search for his estranged parents.

Newcomer Nykiya Adams' characterisation of Bailey is by far the highlight of the film. Adams' performance is strikingly subtle, through body language and facial expressions that capture youthful vulnerability underneath a street-smart, tough exterior. Her reactions feel authentic, owed in part to Arnold's approach of shooting chronologically and limiting access to the script. This in turn makes Bailey's growth throughout the film more linear, from cutting her hair to rebel against the wedding, to tentatively approaching Kayleigh for help when she gets her first period.

Bird maintains a high energy level throughout, through the use of dizzying handheld camera sequences, a rapid editing pace and the visual cacophony of the squat setting. Barry Keoghan's boisterous portrayal of Bug personifies the manic dysfunction of Bailey's home life, and is unfailingly fun to watch. Keoghan's charisma shines through in all his scenes, and despite his impulsivity, it is made clear that Bug is a loving father to Bailey and Hunter.

Cinematically, Bird is stunning. Arnold's longtime cinematographer Robbie Ryan shoots on 16mm film, with vivid colour grading and plenty of lingering shots of the wildlife and natural landscapes of Kent. The curved-edge frame of the film is a visual nod to Bailey's tendency to capture smartphone footage of the world around her, through which she attempts to make sense of her life. Clips of birds and butterflies projected onto her bedroom wall serve as moments of

quiet contemplation and wonder - a welcome respite both for Bailey and the viewer, in a film otherwise punctuated by chaos.

Frank Rogowski's scenes as Bird are similarly mesmerising, dancing through fields at dawn and perching on top of tower blocks in a consistently otherworldly performance. However, the build up of Bird's enigmatic presence feels trumped by the contentious end reveal, which shifts the film firmly into the realms of fantasy. Although slightly bizarre at first, Arnold's most explicit use of magical realism reinforces Bird's significance as a part of Bailey's narrative arc, and imbues a sense of hope that many of her other traditional social realism films lack.