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A pregnant teen gains independence after being abandoned by her boyfriend in an unfamiliar town.

A self-centered young man abandons his pregnant teenage girlfriend in an unknown town, leaving her to fend for herself. She ends up living at the Wal-Mart where he had left her. After living in the Wal-Mart for six weeks, she gives birth to her baby on the floor of the store. This incident makes her a local celebrity, and several compassionate people in town are more than willing to help her with her predicament.

Where The Heart Is: Screenplay by Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel. Synopsis

A pregnant girl, NOVALEE NATION (17), and her boyfriend, WILLY JACK PICKENS (20), head down an Oklahoma highway in an old, beat-up Plymouth. They have moved out of their trailer home in Tennessee and are on their way to California, where Willy Jack has been promised a job on the railroad. Along the way, they stop off at a Wal-Mart in Sequoyah, Oklahoma so Novalee can use the bathroom. While she's inside, Willy Jack drives off, abandoning her. With \$5.50 to her name, Novalee is forced to live at the Wal-Mart. She sleeps on the floor in one of the store's sleeping bags and steals food and other necessary items for her survival.

After living at Wal-Mart for six weeks, Novalee goes into labor on the floor of the store. Suddenly, a man (FORNEY HULL) bursts through the store's window and delivers Novalee's baby (a girl, AMERICUS). Forney's a rather odd man who lives and works at the local library and takes care of his alcoholic sister. He's been secretly following Novalee ever since she came into the library one day. The bizarre circumstances surrounding the birth turn Novalee into a local celebrity. Novalee's newfound fame compels her mother--who abandoned her when she was five--to come visit her at the hospital. Novalee's mother (NELLY) convinces her that she's genuinely concerned about her and Americus, then cons her out of \$500 (the owner of the Wal-Mart had given Novalee the money for bringing the store publicity) and disappears.

After she's released from the hospital, Novalee is taken in by a kind but eccentric woman named SISTER HUSBAND. Sister Husband takes care of Americus while Novalee works at the

Wal-Mart where she had once lived. Novalee also befriends an affable photographer, MOSES WHITECOTTEN. Moses inspires Novalee to consider pursuing a career in photography. While Novalee is rebuilding her life in Sequoyah, Willy Jack takes up with a duplicitous girl and lands in prison. Once he's out, he embarks on a career in country music; he plans to become a huge country star. He makes the rounds to several Nashville-based record companies. After receiving numerous rejections, he meets RUTH MEYERS, a tough, no-nonsense agent. She agrees to be his agent granted he does everything she tells him to; she's impervious to Willy Jack's smooth charm and lets him know early on who's calling the shots. Ruth renames him BILLY SHADOW. After playing gigs at crummy clubs for over two years, Willy Jack finally gets a break when his song "The Beat of A Heart" becomes a big hit.

Meanwhile, Sequoyah is hit by a powerful tornado that levels the Wal-Mart and kills Sister Husband. Novalee is informed that Sister had bequeathed all her possessions to her, which come to forty thousand dollars. Novalee builds a small house with the money Sister left her. Shortly thereafter, Forney's sister, MARY ELIZABETH, is killed in a fire at the library. Novalee consoles Forney and things get intimate; they make love. Afterwards, Forney declares his love for Novalee, but she doesn't express how she really feels about him. Forney decides to move back to Maine to finish college, since he no longer has to look after his sister and believes (wrongly) that Novalee doesn't love him.

In the meantime, Willy Jack has fallen victim to the pitfalls of stardom, becoming a self-destructive, pill-popping souse. During a binge, he falls across a railroad track in the path of an oncoming train. The train severs both of his legs. Novalee reads about Willy Jack's accident in the newspaper and goes to visit him at the hospital. During her visit, it dawns on her why she lied to Forney: She didn't feel that she was good enough for him because of her background. Following the visit, she heads straight to Bowdoin College in Maine where Forney is a student. She tells Forney that she lied to him before, and that she really does love him. They kiss. Later on they get married at a Wal-Mart.

Where The Heart Is: Screenplay by Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel [Comments](#)

This is a charming and inspiring story about a young woman's odyssey to independence and self-respect. It effectively highlights the merits of compassion, self-sacrifice and endurance. The screenplay contains strong, poignant moments, as well as extremely funny ones. And the protagonist, Novalee Nation, is a very sympathetic character. She is a sweet, caring and unassuming young woman who endures many hardships but never becomes bitter or overwhelmed with self-pity. Novalee's circle of friends in Sequoyah become her surrogate family--the loving and supportive kind of family that she never had while growing up.

Moreover, the story has a good concept--the idea of having Novalee live at the Wal-Mart and then give birth to her baby there is novel. And the quirky characters who inhabit this story are interesting and original. Each character possesses his or her own peculiar idiosyncrasy. This makes for some odd and often very funny dialogue. One of the more bizarre characters is Sister Husband, a kind but eccentric woman who has a strange way of ending her dinner graces by asking God to forgive her for committing "fornication with Mr. Sprock." Another memorable character is Novalee's wayward mother, Nell, who asks her daughter if she had been

impregnated through “artificial inspermanation.” And there’s the scene where lady-killer, Willy Jack, tries to smooth talk his way back into the good graces of his jaded, hard-as-nails agent, Ruth Meyers. The line he tries on her is answered with a swift punch in the nose. And Novalee has an odd quirk of her own: an irrational superstition of the number five.

In addition, the screenplay is structured in a clever fashion: The writers skillfully juxtapose Novalee’s and Willy Jack’s stories. And both stories are intriguing. There is concern for Novalee’s fortunes, but there is also interest in what happens to her weasel ex-boyfriend who abandoned her in an unfamiliar town with barely any money. Willy Jack’s story makes for a good subplot that doesn’t undermine the thrust of the main story. In fact, Willy Jack’s travails actually enhance the central story line--audiences will be curious to learn what happens to this louse. Willy Jack functions largely as Novalee’s foil. Whereas she is generous, he is mercenary; whereas she is kind, he is cruel. And while she is compassionate and supportive of people, he simply uses them for what he can gain. Consequently, Willy Jack’s parallel story works to underscore Novalee’s virtues: She grows while he self-destructs.

There are only a few minor problems with the screenplay. One of them is the predictable manner in which Novalee and Forney have their first sexual encounter. It occurs right after Forney’s alcoholic sister has been killed in a fire. While Novalee is consoling him, they start to get intimate. This setup has been overused, and most frequent moviegoers will see it coming a mile away.

However, other than that scene and a few others that aren’t even worth mentioning, this is a great story from start to finish.

Recommend