

A collage of images from the movie 'Pen15' featuring the main cast members in various scenes, decorated with colorful heart, star, and crescent moon stickers. The title 'pen15' is written in large, yellow, lowercase letters in the center.

I can't say that I watch many series, but when I do, I binge. I consumed Pen15 within a week and only partly because I was on a free trial. The series draws you in with its unusual premise, then slowly but surely captivates you with its meticulous investigation of all the shades of nostalgia and cringe. Perhaps two words that describe looking back at one's thirteen-year-old self best.

Written by and starring Anna Konkle and Maya Erskine, the show follows two friends (played by the 30-year-old actors) as they enter middle school and transition from tweens to teens in the early 2000s. With plenty of moments to make you laugh, think and relate, the show is a must-watch.

At its core, the show is a comedy. We watch the women re-enact their awkward firsts: crushes, kisses, sexuality. The show takes you right back to following questionable fashion trends in the hopes of fitting in and attracting some immature floppy-haired heartthrob. In the first few minutes of the pilot, Maya attempts to layer her hair like Sarah Michelle Gellar, ending up with an unfortunate bowl cut. Anna, opting for 2000s hairstyling staple, the two strands framing the face, determinedly twists the loose hairs as she prepares to confront her crush.

Tween crushes are put brutally into perspective when you see adult Anna drool over popular boy and actual 13-year-old Alex. Cheesy soundtrack, slow motion, and all. The show does a great job of portraying how emotionally tumultuous and all engrossing the middle school social scene feels when you're in the midst of it. Luckily, it also expertly lightens the mood with awkward or embarrassing developments.

One of my favourite episodes is 'Community Service'. Probably because I had the very same, super specific, formative experience of glimpsing a hot pink thong on the popular girl. I would love to know if the episode is based on a true story, since what follows is cringe

humour at its finest. The girls steal the underwear and take turns wearing it to the backdrop of a fashion show at a care home.

This isn't the only time the show delves deeper into girls' early explorations of sexuality. Episode 'Ojichan' is probably one of the only times I've seen a woman masturbate on TV, not for shock or artistic value. It's not a 'big' dramatic moment delivering a metaphor or making a statement, but a normal event in the life of a sexually developing person.

Maya's excuses for alone time (such as washing her hands for a while) shouted from behind closed doors at her family and her enthusiasm and experimentation with the activity inject the scenes with humour; however Konkle and Erskine also take the opportunity to explore cultural repression of women's sexuality. Maya's joyous experimentation clashes with how her classmates perceive girls' masturbation. She begins to internalise the attitude that it's taboo and shameful, and her guilt manifests as the ghost of a dead relative. The episode culminates in a clever Ouija board scene full of double entendres ("I didn't flick it!").

In an interview, Erskine comments how female masturbation is rarely mentioned in the media. It does not have the same pervasive presence in representations of teen girls as boys. It has long been a source of comedy in stories about young men, such as the American Pie film franchise, she points out (5:50, BUILD Series, 2019). I remember bingeing those films with my best friend over a course of sleepovers when we were 12. I must say it would've been nice to grow up with Maya, Anna and Pen15's young female gaze instead of Jim and Stifler.

Romance and sex aren't the only things the show isn't afraid to get messy with. Other topics explored are divorce, the loss of a family member and race. These are handled in a sensitive and engaging way. Obsessively eavesdropping on your parents to check if they're yelling at each other again or defensively claiming you're "barely Japanese" (insert appropriate 'other' nationality or culture) are painful but relatable memories for many of us.

Finally, the one constant and compelling theme throughout the episodes is teen girl friendship, at its most intense and rewarding. Konkle and Erskine are best friends in real life; you can tell from their chemistry. What I didn't realise before I did my research, is that they actually met at university. The stories told on the show piece together separate autobiographical elements from the women's teen years.

I guess the fact that I thought I was watching a direct retelling speaks of the show's believable representations. Watching Maya and Anna navigate life, get their first taste of alcohol, talk to strangers in chatrooms and toy with the idea of letting Sylvanians go, you forget that they are 30. During one scene towards the end of the final season, I even found myself protectively saying, "oh God, please don't do it", at the screen. Because Pen15 will make you feel empathy. It will make you feel entertained and vulnerable, uncomfortable, nostalgic, and incredibly glad that your school years are over.