

“Super 8” review: sci-fi or feel-good?

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With apologies to director J. J. Abrams, “Super 8” is a producer’s film ... Spielberg by the book: Flawed but sympathetic characters banding together to overcome formidable odds ... Personal differences among sympathetic characters worked through ... Life-affirming climax ... Brisk, heartwarming, good looking, family friendly, and love, not math, established as the universal language.

Still, I wanted to watch “Super 8” not because I thought it would make me feel good (which it did), but because it’s widely believed that Spielberg knows more about UFO’s than he’s letting on, that maybe all he can do is drop corroborative hints like modeling the character played by Francois Truffaut in “Close Encounters” after real-life ufology legend Jacques Vallee. During a June 6 interview with Eric Vespe of Ain’t It Cool News, Spielberg confirmed two long-standing rumors: 1.) that he’s “a bit of a ufologist,” and 2.) that Ronald Reagan really did announce after a private screening of “Close Encounters” at the White House that Spielberg’s movie was “absolutely true.” (Granted, everybody laughed when he said that, so he might have been kidding.)

Stories about Hollywood’s roll in government-run UFO disclosure and disinformation campaigns go back to at least 1955, when Walt Disney is said to have been approached by government representatives asking him to produce a documentary designed to acclimatize the American public to the extraterrestrial presence. It’s said that Disney was told he’d be given footage of actual UFO’s to use in the documentary. That footage never materialized.

So what can UFO enthusiasts expect from “Super 8” in terms of aliens, alien hardware, military coverups and men in black? What new insights? What glimpses into the dark machinations of the military-industrial complex?

Very little.

The premise is promising enough. Likable middle school kids making a zombie movie in



Personal differences resolved, single fathers and their children watch E.T. go home.

small town America, circa 1979 or thereabouts, are shooting a night scene at the local train depot when a speeding train is derailed by a pickup truck driven onto the tracks by their science teacher, Dr. Woodward.

Train cars explode all around them as they run for their lives just ahead of the Air Force “clean up” crew that arrives almost immediately. Moments before piling into the getaway vehicle that none of them is licensed to drive, they rescue the super 8 camera they’d been using to shoot the depot scene and which they later realize has captured something incredible ... a giant arachnid-like creature emerging from the ruins.

(Spoiler alert)

Before his discharge, middle school science teacher Woodward had been government research scientist Woodward, leading a team of white coats tasked with reverse engineering the arachnid’s spacecraft, which had crashed here in 1958. The Air Force treated their captive miserably, even as Woodward insisted that they might gain more by helping it get back home, which was all it really wanted to do. (Sound familiar?) The Air Force rewarded Woodward’s compassion with a dishonorable discharge.

Twenty years later, Woodward, overcome by

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guilt, almost kills himself by deliberately causing the train transporting the arachnid to derail in an attempt to set it free. Air Force personnel seize Woodward and his records and shackle him to a hospital bed, but he refuses to tell them what they want to know. So they kill him, start a forest fire as an excuse to evacuate the town, presumably as prelude to using nuclear missiles to kill the arachnid, which by now is on the loose and wreaking havoc.

Meanwhile, the arachnid is busy inside its subterranean burrow using electrical transformers, electrical cable, microwave ovens and automobile engines to build an escape vehicle. Sounds crazy, I know, but it works. A spacecraft magically coalesces around a magnetized water tower and the arachnid scuttles aboard. Music in, medium shot of protagonists staring up in peaceful wonder, closeup of love interests holding hands for the first time, liftoff.

The end.

Which would be fine, if we'd ever gotten a clear view of the alien, or if we'd spent a little bit more time dealing with the military's involvement, or if we'd gotten to see the spacecraft for more than five seconds at night from a distance. Or if Spielberg had given Abrams permission to make “Super 8” more like “Cloverfield” and less like “E.T.” I mean, throw us a bone, Steven. Some of us bought tickets to see the mother-ship again. Or that thing that killed those people in Central Park.

Instead, the alien, its ship and all related elements serve as backdrop for a story about wounded parents and misunderstood children, friendship and first love, which is perfect family fare, no doubt. Science fiction, however, not so much, certainly not for the hard-core among us. And it's nothing for UFO enthusiasts to get excited about either. To you I say, unless you're looking for a date movie, save your money, wait for the rental.

Trust me on this, okay?