

The opening credits of *Race to Witch Mountain* are a fast-cut, grainy, montage of newsreel clips, tabloid headlines, and Roswell references. Setting up a history of believers, cynics, and conspiracy theories, it's a relatively sharp start to a movie that quickly degenerates into little more than one long chase scene.

2009-03-13 (General release)

Jack Bruno (Dwayne Johnson) came to Vegas with NASCAR aspirations, ending up instead as driver/muscle for local crime boss, Mr. Wolf. After a short stint in jail for grand theft auto, Jack has ended up a cab driver trying to make good, despite Wolf's efforts to pull him back in. We see him running a few fares to the UFO Space Expo: first, a couple of guys in Storm Trooper costumes who demand, "Take us to Planet... Hollywood!" before breaking into snarky fanboy giggles, and then the lovely astrophysicist Dr. Alex Friedman (Carla Gugino), whom he inadvertently insults when he starts busting on the "nut job convention," not realizing she's one of the featured speakers.

Because he's not exactly solvent, Jack is not averse to taking Seth (Alexander Ludwig) and Sara (AnnaSophia Robb) to the middle of the desert, as they offer him a huge roll of cash. Appearing out of nowhere in the back of his cab, they are generally odd, though maybe not so much as his previous fares. Even when the trio is chased down by a fleet of dark SUVs, Jack never assumes the pursuit has anything to do with Seth and Sara, but rather that Wolf has sent his thugs after him again. It's not until he follows the teens into an underground lair full of *Alien*-esque pods and a *Predator*-like space traveling baddie called Siphon (Tom Woodruff Jr.) that Jack starts demanding answers.

Jack finally learns what we already know from the beginning (and the trailer), that Sara and Seth are aliens. Engaged on a vague quest (they have to recover some device that will stave off an invasion of Earth), they enlist Jack's help to get back to their spaceship, so they can get home. Their planet, centuries ahead of ours on the path to environmental neglect and destruction, is dying. Though Seth and Sara's scientist parents have discovered a solution to regenerate the planet, their government prefers military solutions to scientific ones. It is less trouble to abandon their own resource-depleted planet and invade Earth, which, by comparison, is still resource-rich. To that end, Siphon has been sent to thwart Sara and Seth's mission.

U.S. government agent Dr. Henry Burke (Ciaran Hinds) represents the same threat to Seth and Sara, but in human form (though he is similarly ruthless and automaton-like), always right on their heels, thanks to an endless network of surveillance camera images at his fingertips. But Seth and Sara could not have picked a better cab driver and accomplice. Jack's stock car racing experience helps him outrun and outwit Burke and his team at every turn, and he never compromises his integrity. Actually, this is kind of annoying. On the run in a bright yellow cab, Jack never puts that auto theft background to good use by getting them a faster, or at least less conspicuous, getaway car. But then I guess promoting theft is not really fitting for a kids' movie, though beatings, trespassing, and subverting government agendas apparently are.

Race to Witch Mountain holds no surprises (even granting that it s a remake). It can't seem to decide on a "message," and so it gives superficial treatment to several, adding "Everyman versus big government" and "Loner finds his place in a makeshift family" to its facile commentary on U.S. environmental and immigration policies. A hodgepodge of visual and character references to its sci-fi predecessors, its many allusions might be interpreted as blatant rip-offs or, less cynically, as tributes: Siphon sneaks onto the kids' getaway spaceship, recreating the end of *Alien* (complete with airlock solution, but with Jack in the Ripley role); Burke and company always appear in dark suits a la *Men in Black*; the scenes at Witch Mountain recall those at Devil's Tower in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; and Alex is like *Contact*'s Ellie Arroway, while Dr. Harlan (Gary Marshall), the quirky UFO crackpot, hides behind the foil-covered windows of his Winnebago like *Independence Day*'s Russell Casse. Most of these references will likely be lost on the new kid crop seeing *Race to Witch Mountain*, but through them it offers a semi-cute parade through movies past for the parents to enjoy.

RATING **5**



SOUTH PARK: THE COMPLETE TWELFTH SEASON

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