

Movie Draft: *Fly By Night*

by Mike Wagner

(*Fly By Night* is one of four made-up films generated during PoopReading.com's recent [Movie Draft](#).)

What if the moon landing was faked? What if you knew it was faked? Would you become a physicist obsessed with rocket and time travel to go back in time and save America from the Flat Earth Society's screams of "I told you so?" If you're Ari Falcone (a skittish, but engaging Robert Downey, Jr.) you would. *Fly By Night* is a fast-moving treatment of a conspiracy theorist's delight that asks viewers to embrace both skepticism and belief as they follow Falcone's quest to save America's belief in itself and the quirky, bespectacled Falcone's belief in himself.

The film opens on July 18, 1969, just two days before Neil Armstrong allegedly took one small step for man. Falcone and his mother, the criminally underused Kate Winslet, are driving through the New Mexico desert when Falcone wanders over a hill by a gas station to see a group of NASA astronauts faking the moon landing. Two days later, the world was glued to the television watching the very event Falcone had seen two days earlier outside of Taos. And so began a long journey of secret research by a boy who would become a Berkeley physicist, obsessed with time travel so he could right the wrong of the faked moon landing.

But Falcone's brilliance has hit a professional and personal snag. Smart enough to focus on less crazy sounding projects to earn tenure, Falcone's increased attention to perfecting time travel have caused him to lose his family, the respect of his peers, and even the lab resources to which he had become accustomed when he was being more productive. Enter Gracie Emerson (Amy Adams), the willowy, but brilliant grad student willing to give Falcone's theory...and personality, a chance.

The scenes at Berkeley (shot on location) rustle with the hubbub of university life that actually makes astrophysics seem exciting and important. The script deftly crafts seemingly inconsequential scenes in ways that speak to the larger questions the film seeks to explore about what is real, whether people need to know the truth, and how to count on things (love, people!) that you can't measure, predict, or control.

What I suspect is a bit too simply for the physicists in the audience, Emerson solves the technical glitch that had been driving Falcone mad and the hero professors are off to 1969. Falcone's mother re-enters the picture in ways too reminiscent of Winslet's mind-travel in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and Falcone and Emerson have to avoid letting adult Ari come in contact with his mother, or worse, little Ariel. After some suspenseful and comical close calls (the director had clearly seen *Back to the Future* one too many times before principal photography), Falcone and

Emerson learn the whole truth: the moon landing wasn't faked after all.

While NASA actors were climbing down the LEM in New Mexico, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were hurtling back to earth with the real-live aliens they found on the moon! NASA's higher ups, including a wonderfully understated Taraji P. Henson in the role of head bureaucrat in charge of the coverup, felt the public wasn't ready to learn about the man on the moon and staged the fake landing to allay suspicion. Look for a blink-and-you'll-miss-it scene containing Heath Ledger's final performance as a pocket protector with a conscience who helps Falcone and Emerson navigate life at NASA in 1969.

Of course, just as Emerson taught Falcone a little something about physics, she also teaches him a little something about love. Thankfully, Downey Jr.'s tour de force performance and Adams's usual pitch-perfect portrayal light up the screen. You root for their relationship just as you hope they can sneak under Henson's nose thanks to a hilarious scene in which Ledger distracts Henson with a narrow tie, a coke bottle, and an off-color joke about Lee Harvey Oswald.

Shot in a starkly bright fashion, Downey's tight frame and itchy demeanor crackles off the screen while Adams's luminescent glow ground him and the film more generally. Save a knowing look from Henson (in excellent Rick Baker old-age makeup), in the film's final scene, the director avoids unnecessary cuteness, opting instead for a thrilling ride filled with fanciful science, brilliant performances, an ingenious what if question, and little green moon men. Never has the actual moon landing seemed so pedantic.

Fly by Night contains time travel, decidedly real (but not at all upsetting) violence, adult situations, a sweetly awkward love scene, and totally appropriate, ridiculously funny uses of adult language by a young boy who witnesses the faking of the moon landing.
