

Man meets boy struggling with "alien nation"

Screenplay by Seth Bass and Jonathan Tolins

Novel by David Gerrold

Directed by Menno Meyjes

John Cusack ... David

Bobby Coleman ... Dennis aka the Martian Child

Amanda Peet ... Harlee

Sophie Okonedo ... Sophie

Joan Cusack ... Liz

Oliver Platt ... Jeff

Bud ... Somewhere aka Flomar

Richard Schiff ... Lefkowitz

Sorry about the pun... it just popped up in my head. This movie was recommended by my niece and her husband, who seem to find every Indie-like movie that's really good. Unlike me, a Netflix junkie, they take the family down to a local video store in Rochester as sort of a ritual—they bring their two little girls along so the girls can pick up Barney or Sponge Bob (or whatever the little ones find amusing these days), then spend some time reading the jackets and grabbing a couple of movies they expect to be rewarding from an adult perspective. Not "adult" adult (tho you never know), I mean movies where the dialog is more sophisticated than:

I love you

You love me

Oh how happy we will be

Ahilt, Ahilt [I guess that's Goofy not Barney.]

Last time we all met for lunch, they mentioned Martian Child along with The Amateurs, starring Jeff Bridges, both sort of offbeat movies—then making it a trio of offbeat movies, I picked up King of California a bit later. All worth seeing, good for taking your mind off your troubles and gaining sundry insights into the human condition.

Martian Child moves right along, you might say right out of the box, inasmuch as that's where we first meet the boy Dennis (Bobby Coleman)... who thinks he's been sent here from Mars. Dennis is a resident, with several other apparently human children, at a Seattle-like area foster home. David (John Cusack) is a recent widower. His wife was a passionate and loving woman who wanted them to adopt, since they couldn't have children. When David first shows up at the foster home, he's informed by one of the other children that Dennis is the one standing inside an upside-down dishwasher shipping box, with a peep hole in the side (to protect him from the sun).

David, a highly successful science fiction author, does a lot of soul-searching—there are also a few charming scenes where we see David talking with Dennis and getting a handle on the Martian-child way of looking at the world—before he finally decides to go ahead. David fills out the paperwork, satisfies the stern boss man of the state fostercare system Lefkowitz (Richard Schiff) then they go back to David's modern, swank digs and start building a relationship. Referring to the house...

"Just think of it as a bigger box."

— David

David has a close childhood friend who happens to be female, Harlee (Amanda Peet); Harlee is the perfect friend, she knows everything about David, was also very close to his wife, and would basically do anything to make him happy. David vice versa for Harlee, except he's slower to realize how important Harlee is to his life. David also has a sister Liz, played naturally by Cusack's true-life sister Joan Cusack. Liz has two kids and is not exactly an emissary of the wonder and beauty of having offspring, much less caring for the little buggers. She advises David to hold off and not to have great expectations.

Another player in the menagerie is David's dog "Somewhere," a copper-colored long-haired mutt who's, well, a man's best friend... becoming an important ally in little Dennis's maturation. As moviegoers, frankly, most of us are going to be a little unsure whether Dennis really is from Mars. What a remarkable character the young actor, Bobby Coleman, creates for us! The way he talks, the way he moves, the elegant projects he designs and builds, his detailed knowledge of the cosmos, the purposeful explorations of his new natural surroundings, speaking in a Martian dialect, Martian hand gestures, and my favorite: his Martian music and dance routine.

With all this strange behavior, during which he doesn't smile or laugh, we can see he's beginning to form an attachment to his adoptive father. There's a scene later in the relationship where David is recovering from one of the accidents engendered by the cute, but obviously troubled, boy. David is turned away from and in front of Dennis, and David is exasperated, his right hand down by his side. Just as Dennis moves tentatively forward to gently put his hand in David's hand, David—not seeing the boy—brings up his (David's) hand to put it in his pocket.

This is a tender moment, and the audience breathes a sigh of disappointment. It's about at that point in the film that we realize young Dennis is deeply troubled, also deeply in need of some love... he's reaching out, literally. He's so cute, you want to just hold him and protect him, but he is also so full of sadness.

I guess you would call *Martian Child* a chick flick, definitely a relationship flick. It brings to life so many real relationships and blankets them lightly with warm, intelligent colors, never a false or forced move. John Cusack is fabulous as usual, playing the grief-stricken husband and the ever-so-hopeful father. While the boy is the story, the man is the context: David's own personality is brilliantly creative and imaginative, perpetually youthful, just as Dennis's. His other relationships, with his sister and his "girl" friend and his dog and the lady at the foster home, are subtly drawn works of art. As is his relationship to authority figures.

That's another thing: the movie avoids easy stereotyping, even from a libertarian standpoint. The state officials who must ultimately okay the placement of Dennis are human and caring, showing signs of semibrilliant individuality of their own. They're not ogres.

Anyone with a heart and mind is going to enjoy this movie. It's a fine mixture—marvelously written, wonderfully acted—of humor and pathos. Totally real yet sublimely idealistic. I want to mention Amanda Peet's performance in particular: in my humble opinion she's as fine an actress as we have working these days. I thought she was ROFL in that otherwise forgettable Bruce Willis/Matthew Perry movie, *The Whole Nine Yards*. In *Syriana*, she plays the aggrieved wife of an international oil investment broker (Matt Damon) who loses her son in a freak accident and faces a life of bleak isolation.... Well, she's great.

Anyway, a good investment of your weekend-entertainment Federal Reserve note.

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