

“DARK SKIES” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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The title of and ad campaign for DARK SKIES, not to mention an opening quotation from science-fiction legend Arthur C. Clarke, almost feel like miscalculations. The movie develops a decently teasing sense of mystery in its first half that can only be diluted by foreknowledge of what’s going on.

DARK SKIES is what feels like the 27th movie “from the producer of PARANORMAL ACTIVITY and INSIDIOUS,” and like the latter film and producer Jason Blum’s SINISTER, it roots its terror in an average suburban family threatened by mysterious, malevolent forces. Not that Lacy and Daniel Barrett (Keri Russell and Josh Hamilton) don’t already have problems of their own: Daniel is unemployed and struggling to find work in the face of mounting bills, and their older son Jesse (Dakota Goyo) is spending too much time with a bad-influence older friend. Meanwhile, younger son Sam (Kadan Rockett—what a perfect name for a sci-fi kid) has been having disturbing dreams about a presence called “The Sandman,” who appears to have been spawned in his mind from the scary stories Jesse reads him, and in reality starts engaging in POLTERGEIST-style stacking tricks in the kitchen late at night.



Writer/director Scott Stewart, whose previous features were the CGI-heavy LEGION and PRIEST, here adopts a more measured, restrained approach, eliciting a quietly threatening

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mood with deep rumbles of Joseph Bishara’s score and pulling off a few successful jump moments (especially if you haven’t seen the trailer). The escalating oddness in the Barrett home counterbalances neatly with the mundane domestic pressures they’re facing, and Russell and Hamilton are a likable and empathetic pair of leads as they become increasingly concerned over Sam’s—and eventually their own—strange behavior. While Lacy takes to Google to figure out what’s going on, Daniel installs surveillance cameras throughout the house, allowing for a bit of manipulated video ACTIVITY reminiscent of Blum’s hit franchise as well.

From the evidence cited above, however, we’re ahead of the Barretts, and know that the presences infiltrating their home are not of this Earth. With that awareness, it’s not too hard to guess what the invaders want, or where the story will go as it proceeds into its third act: a visit with a reclusive expert (J.K. Simmons, effectively eschewing a conspiracy-ranting approach and adopting a more resigned tone in his delivery), and a final stand in which windows are boarded and shotguns wielded against an enemy that has clearly proven to have supernatural properties. The climax also requires one of the characters to make a very foolish move, and a portion of it takes the film into odd territory that’s more surreal than sci-fi.

If DARK SKIES ultimately doesn’t explore much fresh territory for its subgenre, it’s also better than its unscreened-in-advance status might suggest. The production is slick while remaining grounded in the reality required to center the story, and Stewart and his cast get us to care about the characters even as we feel like we’ve seen the forces threatening them before. Never mind what’s happening in the skies; it’s the darkness that descends within the Barretts’ household that proves most resonant here.

