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## **THE SUM OF ALL FEARS**

In *The Sum of All Fears*, the latest film adaptation of one of Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan thrillers – the other movies being *The Hunt for Red October*, *Patriot Games*, and *Clear & Present Danger*

– America and Russia are headed for war. In a horrifying scene that, given our national consciousness, might deeply unsettle audiences, a nuclear device has detonated at a football stadium in Baltimore, and all indicators point to the Russians and their new president (Ciaran Hinds) masterminding the attack. Our government, and our mildly befuddled president (James Cromwell), are readying a counter-assault that will inevitably lead to World War III, but Jack Ryan, our one-man CIA, knows that something's just not right about our leaders' assumptions, and tries to ... hey, wait a minute, is that

*Ben Affleck*

playing Ryan?

Employing a cinematic act of "do-overs," screenwriters Paul Attanasio and Daniel Pyne, and director Phil Alden Robinson, have completely reconceived Clancy's central character. Ryan is no longer the married-with-child CIA agent played by Alec Baldwin in *Red October* and Harrison Ford in the most recent two, but a gawky analyst just getting his feet wet in the agency while dating a successful surgeon (Bridget Moynahan). Not being married to Clancy's works, this didn't bother me in the least, and, since he serves as an executive producer on the film, it's doubtful that it bothered Clancy much. The casting of Ben Affleck, though,

## Affleck Drags Down Latest Clancy Thriller: "The Sum of All Fears" and "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron"

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 04 June 2002 18:00

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*did*

bother me. The man has his gifts, and recently turned in a first-rate performance in *Changing Lanes*

, but the sad truth of the matter is that Ben Affleck doesn't seem all that smart. He's terribly earnest, but when his Ryan speaks fluent Russian, discusses the thesis papers he's written, or makes deductions that elude the greatest minds in our government, you don't buy it for a minute. Ben Affleck is fine when his character is flustered – or when, early on, he engages in some banter over the correct pronunciation of the Russians' last names – but he's a soggy wet center for a political thriller; unlike his predecessors Baldwin and Ford, he can't pull off the Brilliant Tough-Guy act, and he inspires some inappropriate giggles.

Too bad, because for the most part, *The Sum of All Fears* is an enjoyable piece of hogwash, much better than the enervated *Clear & Present Danger*

. Director Robinson shows an unanticipated talent for escalating tension – especially considering the work he's best known for is *Field of Dreams*

– and while the plotting is mostly ridiculous, the dialogue is tart and surprisingly flaky; you might not believe a minute of the picture, but it's gripping and surprisingly quick-witted. You're also treated to the incandescent, continuing pleasure that is Morgan Freeman, a group of familiar character actors (Philip Baker Hall, Ron Rifkin, Bruce McGill, and the like) bellowing as government staffers, Alan Bates in full, hissing villainousness as a neo-Nazi, and Liev Schreiber as an American assassin who's dangerous, mysterious, and funny in equal measure. Any chance of

*him*

playing Ryan in future installments?



### ***SPIRIT: STALLION OF THE CIMARRON***

I wish the creators and animators behind Dreamworks' *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* had trusted how wonderful their images were. Set before the colonization of the American West, the film traces the path of a wild horse, eventually named Spirit, as he is separated from his family and captured by Union soldiers, where a cruel Army general (voiced by the busy James

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Cromwell) tries to break him. Our heroic steed, however, escapes with the aid of a brave Native American youth (Daniel Studi), only to find himself, yet again, held captive, this time by the well-meaning Native American and his fellow tribesmen, who attempt more humane taming methods. All Spirit wants is to return to his life of freedom, and what's most marvelous about the movie is that this quest is made apparent completely without dialogue. Bucking the tradition of having animated animal characters speak aloud, the creators of

*Spirit*

allow only their human characters a literal voice. The emotions of Spirit, and the film's other horses, are made obvious strictly through their facial expressions, and while there's still a bit of Disney-style cheating that occurs in that regard – horses rolling their eyes at the ridiculousness of humans, throwing a mischievous grin our way, that sort of thing – it's a blessed change of pace to see animated animals acting, for the most part, like

*animals*

. Because

*Spirit*

's filmmakers don't provide dialogue for our four-legged friends, the children in the audience pay closer attention to the movie's visuals, gleaning what information they can from the animals' expressions, and a kind of awe is created in the cineplex; for stretches, the film has some of the poetic resonance of Carroll Ballard's

*The Black Stallion*

.

Had directors Kelly Asbury and Lorna Cook, and screenwriter John Fusco, maintained this level of beguiling simplicity, *Spirit* might have emerged as a new classic. The 2-D animation is glorious throughout, with vivid colors and thrilling action scenes (the best being a terrifying sequence involving a locomotive that's run off its tracks – for a moment, the film resembles an animated version of *The Fugitive*), and the movie features a good, strong storyline for kids about the importance of individuality and trusting those who are different from you. Yet the film is hobbled by two elements that it certainly could have done without: A needless voice-over narration, and an astonishingly drippy musical score. Throughout the film, Matt Damon pops up on the soundtrack as the "inner voice" of Spirit, explaining how the steed feels at various times throughout the tale, and it wouldn't be so annoying if he didn't keep vocalizing things the audience – and we're talking kids here – had already figured out. The film's visuals are so specific that when we see a shot of Spirit looking lonely we can easily empathize; we don't need to hear, moments later, Matt Damon sighing, "I never felt so lonely." Pointless at it is, though, this narration doesn't seriously hurt the movie; the songs do.

*Spirit*

features not one, not two, but

*eight*

power ballads and soft-rock numbers by Bryan Adams, and all of them, with their uninspired lyrics and "Go the Distance" pluckiness, make you cringe. (Actually, there might only be *seven*

numbers with the eighth being a reprise, but they all sounded the same, so it was hard to tell.)

Due to these aggravations, which feel tacked-on after the feature had been completed,

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### *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*

just misses being terrific, but I'm curious enough to want to catch it later on DVD; something tells me that, with the sound turned off, it might be one hell of a silent feature.