

Movie Review: 'The Number 23'

by Arthur Salm

It's supposed to get downright spooky after a while. Except it doesn't.

Animal-control guy - that is, dogcatcher - Walter Sparrow (Jim Carrey) starts reading a tattered little self-published novel called "The Number 23" that his wife, Agatha (Virginia Madsen), picked up in a used bookstore.

'THE NUMBER 23' - Virginia Madsen and Danny Huston are featured in the drama 'The Number 23.'
CNS Photo courtesy of Christine Loss.

Eerily, the plot of the book parallels his own life. Eerier still - except it's not - is the book's fascination with what's known in certain more suggestible circles as "the 23 enigma." Human parents each contribute 23 chromosomes to a child; Shakespeare was born on April 23; the Knights Templar had 23 Grand Masters; the Titanic sank on April 15, 1912 (add the numbers together); and so on and on.

Walter at first ridicules the book, then becomes increasingly obsessed with it as more and more of the details fall into line with his own history. "The Number 23" ends up being an extraordinarily uneven, herky-jerky contraption as it shifts in and out of the novel Walter is reading. In these scenes, the main character, a detective named Fingerling (Carrey), comes to believe he is being pursued - stalked - by the deadly force of That Number.

The novel-come-to-life sequences are hyper-real, truly unsettling near-expressionist frenzies that director Joel Schumacher ("Batman & Robin," with Carrey as the Riddler) fashions into a world so compelling you wish that this was the movie that had been filmed: Give us the backstory on Suicide Blonde (Lynn Collins)!

The decelerations back to real life are without exception letdowns, given the increasingly ludicrous series of coincidences, contrivances and red herrings necessary to keep this perpetual-nonsense machine in motion. Among many other things: For someone with an obsession, it takes Walter an awful long time to read what looks like a very short book; it becomes necessary for a woman to enter a dark, deserted building alone; a man key to the mystery commits suicide for no apparent reason; and in a novel sequence, a woman (also played by Madsen) makes the old mistake - will dames never learn? - of spitting out the words "I never loved you. You're pathetic" to a man with a knife at her throat.

Carrey for the most part dials down his energy level, but given that he's calibrated differently from the rest of us, his Walter is strung taut enough that even semi-dozing in his doggie van he suggests oncoming heebie-jeebies. By the time he's forced into situations that veer uncomfortably close to Jack Nicholson in "The Shining" and Guy Pearce in "Memento" - there's even mad scribbling on walls - he's downshifted into full-on Carrey-shtick. That can be a hoot, depending on your taste, and it's almost enough to distract you from the loose ends and the "Huh?"s that are left lying all over the set.

In fact, if there's any real fun to be had at all with "The Number 23," it's in post-op dismantling; so little of it, in retrospect, makes any sense. As for the "23 enigma," the movie neglects to mention one - an expression popular near the beginning of the last century, meaning to leave in a hurry or, sometimes, to be rushed out: "23 skidoo," guys and dolls liked to say. Would've worked for me.

A New Line Cinema release. Director: Joel Schumacher. Writer: Fernley Phillips. Cast: Jim Carrey, Virginia Madsen, Danny Huston, Rhona Mitra, Lynn Collins. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Rated R. 1 1/2 stars.

RATINGS

4 stars - Excellent.

3 stars - Worthy.

2 stars - Mixed.

1 star - Poor.

0 stars - Forget it.

