

Project Hail Mary—a hopeful (but somewhat wishful) adventure

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In *Project Hail Mary*, set some years in the near future, high school science teacher—and disgraced molecular biologist—Ryland Grace (Ryan Gosling) awakens alone on a spacecraft light-years from Earth, his memory in fragments. As the mental fog clears, he discovers he is on a desperate (“Hail Mary”) mission: Grace is humanity’s last hope to stop a stellar parasitic microorganism, “astrophage,” from consuming the Sun within 30 years.

While the film—adapted from Andy Weir’s 2021 novel of the same title—is clearly a labor of love by directors Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, its greatest strength lies more in its spirit than its depth. The movie is undeniably sincere and well-made, pursuing themes of tolerance and solidarity (between people and between species!). Its reliance, however, on too-easy laughs and too-naïve empathy results in a tribute to human—and non-human—ingenuity that is more lighthearted diversion than substantive endorsement of united action against crisis conditions. The overall result is a charming but cartoonish pastiche that, while broadly appealing, falls short of its ambition to be a truly insightful film. More on this below.

As it unfolds, the story flashes between present and past as Grace’s amnesia clears and he begins filling in the gaps. We learn that he has been sponsored by a powerful global agency authorized to investigate the threat to Earth’s life-giving star. Among the implausibilities we are asked to accept is the framing of Grace as the ultimate maverick—a quintessential outsider whose brilliance and resiliency represent humanity’s only slim chance for survival.

Furthermore, we discover that our protagonist is defined not just by his exceptional intellect, but by his willingness to defy convention and stand firm against widespread opposition. Central to Grace’s character is his supposedly audacious theory that extraterrestrial life need not be water-based—a proposition that, in reality, has long been accepted as a scientific probability.

In flashback, scientists from around the world set to work studying astrophage. They determine on a mission to investigate Tau Ceti, the only “nearby” star (12 light-years from the Solar system) that has not been devoured by astrophage. However, there is only fuel enough for a one-way mission. Three days before the scheduled launch, a catastrophic accident kills a scientist and his back-up. This leaves Grace as the logical replacement for the three-person crew, a role he refuses and has to be physically strong-armed into fulfilling. He much later compensates for this, in a significant act of self-sacrifice.

Project Hail Mary pivots from a struggle for survival to a

scientific procedural as Grace’s ship approaches Tau Ceti and its planets. Grace there encounters an alien vessel and forms a partnership with the sole occupant, a stone-like, five-legged engineer he nicknames “Rocky.” The latter is a slightly punctilious, but mild-mannered engineer from a world where sound is the primary means of communication. Their bond—forged through the shared languages of musical tones, mathematics and a common goal—becomes the emotional heart of the film.

Where Weir’s novel attempts to develop the scientific foundations of these interactions at some length, the film is skimpy on detail, leaving narrative holes the audience is asked to overlook. We come to understand that the one alien life form termed astrophage poses an existential threat, while another—present on one of Tau Ceti’s planets—becomes an indispensable if accidental aid. And even astrophage itself provides a certain kind of salvation.

Project Hail Mary distinguishes itself by rejecting certain sci-fi tropes in which extraterrestrials are either malevolent invaders (*Alien*, *Star Wars*) or grand saviors (*Arrival*, *First Contact*). Instead, it presents a planet where survival hinges on human cooperation—a global effort that eventually leads to an alliance with an alien species.

The film’s visuals are often powerful, and succeed in creating several transporting and exhilarating sequences. Genuine care has been paid to create a kind of physical and psychological realism under the extreme and extraordinary circumstances.

While *Project Hail Mary* avoids direct commentary on the current assault on scientific institutions by the Trump-Kennedy administration and others, its tremendous popularity suggests social processes at work. Alongside recent works like *Oppenheimer* and even *Frankenstein*, this success reflects a public appetite for scientific explanations and a growing resistance to irrationalism and backwardness.

The film’s release was undoubtedly bolstered by fortunate timing. NASA provided guidance throughout filming, and is also participating in activities related to the release of the film to connect the agency’s missions, innovations and discoveries to the public. The movie premiered less than two weeks before the Artemis II launch—the first crewed mission to the Moon since the Apollo era, but despite some speculation, there was reportedly no planned coordination with NASA. This historical milestone in space exploration may nonetheless have focused public interest, grounding the film’s fictional science in a current scientific

endeavor.

Beyond the timing and significant budget, the film's success signals societal shifts. The widespread popularity of Ryland Grace and Rocky's story suggests audiences hungry for work that celebrates inventiveness and the spirit of collaboration.

Composer Daniel Pemberton caught this point, noting: "There is a real desire for people to embrace science, competence, friendship, loyalty, knowledge, wonder—all kinds of words that feel like they've been sucked out of our own universes recently."

The score deserves recognition, providing as it does a good deal of the emotional propellant and drama. Pemberton has previously collaborated with the directing team of Lord and Miller. The soundtrack features such inspired choices as school children stomping and clapping, a "squeaky water tap" recorded on an iPhone, as well as a number of specialty instruments. A somewhat heavy handed percussive underscore throughout, unfortunately, leaves little choice to the viewer as to how he or she should be feeling at any given moment.

The "needle drop" musical selections vary in quality, but choices like Kris Kristofferson's soulful "Sunday Morning Coming down" and Miriam Makeba's infectious "Pata Pata" are surprisingly affecting. The musical highlight of the film is an extraordinary rendition of Harry Styles' "Sign of the Times" performed by Sandra Hüller in the role of Eva Stratt, the woman who wields great authority granted by the "governments of the world" to get the job done. Hüller brings a welcome maturity and humanity to the part while maintaining a convincing gravitas.

The Hüller scene unfolds during a farewell karaoke session aboard an aircraft carrier when Stratt commandeers the microphone and, as heads turn, begins to sing with unexpected pathos. As the crew joins her in the haunting refrain—"Just stop your crying, it's a sign of the times ... We gotta get away from here"—she suddenly cuts the moment short, reverting to her "Iron Lady" persona and marching away. The sequence is genuinely moving, making the film's parallels to our own world feel inescapable.

Among other technical achievements, the technology behind the alien's animation is truly cutting edge. Although a purely digital alien creation was possible, the production opted for a physical presence on set to allow Gosling to interact with a tangible partner, later enhanced by computer animation. James Ortiz was originally hired to lead the "Rocky-tears" and provide a vocal guide track; however, his performance brought such life to the character that he was ultimately cast as the screen voice, earning significant critical acclaim.

The amiable, endearing elements in *Project Hail Mary* are real. They help account for its success. However, there are problems that undermine or work against the film's best intentions.

Ultimately, the story follows too much of a classic "superhero" arc: despite the global, life-and-death stakes, the fate of humanity rests on the unique abilities of one individual (or two) to save the day.

The novel itself is a journeyman effort, consistent with the literary quality, for better or worse, of Weir's previous works *The Martian* and *Artemis*. While the film differs in many ways from the book and necessarily abbreviates the drama, it shares the

novel's specific worldview: a belief that the dire state of the world—though only vaguely acknowledged—can be solved through a simple combination of goodwill, compassion and resourcefulness.

In our story, every member nation of the UN collaborates to send ArcLight, the most expensive unmanned spacecraft ever built, to Venus to investigate. The Project Hail Mary Mission flag displays over a dozen countries, including the US and China side by side. The assumption that the world's governments would naturally unite against an existential threat stands in stark contrast to the reality of predatory alliances and the escalating risk of global conflict.

Despite its admirable grounding in "hard" science and real-world technology, the playful opening sequences of *Project Hail Mary* signal that the work should not be taken too seriously. Many of its stylistic choices are borrowed from the superhero and animation genres—territory familiar to Lord and Miller, known for *The Lego Movie* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*.

The movie is primarily sustained by youthful cheerfulness and the—arguably overly comical—portrayal of Rocky, both of which encourage the audience to forgive its obvious flaws.

Ryan Gosling's disarming charm and humor do much to ground the film, making even the "maverick scientist" cliché largely palatable. In fact, the film relies a great deal on Gosling's appeal and comic timing as his character improvises and extricates himself from a series of apparently impossible difficulties.

Gosling has also stressed the optimism of the film in interviews: "It's hopeful in the sense that it supports this idea and believes in this idea we're capable of anything and no matter how bleak it seems that as long as you don't give up, hope that anything is possible."

Surpassing \$350 million at the global box office, *Project Hail Mary* is 2026's highest-grossing film so far. There is a biting irony in its success: a story championing logic and global cooperation is thriving in a year defined by catastrophic imperialist war and threats of greater war.

The main problem is that the filmmakers present a world the way they would *like it to be*, with governments dedicated to working together and solving burning problems. While a vision of life that goes beyond the present state of affairs can serve as a catalyst for change, it loses its impact when it fails to root itself in and ignores present harsh realities. This amorphous, wishful, complacent element weakens the whole effort. Even within the expansive bounds of science fiction, there is no use side-stepping the way things actually are.



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