

Fall review – wildly effective survival thriller delivers seat-edge suspense

[Benjamin Lee](#)



An image from Fall. Photograph: Lionsgate

Pre-release debates over the title of Jordan Peele's patchy summer hit [Nope](#) were settled last month when the secretive writer-director [revealed](#) that no, it wasn't an acronym for "not of planet earth" but was something far more simple. It was, as others had expected, a nod to what many audiences are accustomed to wearily shouting at the screen during a horror film. Investigate that unsettling sound coming from a barely

lit basement in a remote house late at night? Nope! Accept a lift from a creepy stranger in a blood-spattered pick-up truck? Nope! Climb up an ancient and abandoned 2,000ft radio tower without support, food or alerting anyone else first? Nope!

With the release of ridiculous yet undeniably rattling new thriller *Fall*, it'll be heard on a loop from cinemagoers across the US this weekend, said first with an eye-roll before being screamed through sweat-drenched fingers. Hinged on a setup so stupid that it takes some strength to make it through the first 15 minutes without checking out, **the buzz-free August surprise manages to erase all early doubt with enough genuine seat-edge suspense to turn it into the most exciting and effectively agonising action movie of the summer.** I found it hard not to quietly cheer while watching this tiny-budgeted underdog swoop in and climb its way to the top of the tower; Mavericks, Thors and Grey Men falling away with speed.

In a sub-Cliffhanger cold open, Becky (Grace Fulton) suffers a devastating loss when her husband Dan (Mason Gooding) falls to his death in a climbing accident leaving her and best friend Hunter (Virginia Gardner) to pick up the pieces. A year later, Becky is drowning her sorrows when Hunter, now a successful YouTuber specialising in extreme stunts, calls, saving her from the brink. The estranged pair reunite when

Hunter suggests she join her on an audacious climb to the top of a 2,000ft tower in the middle of the desert. Spurred on by a vague idea of confronting fear, she says yes. But when they reach the very top, disaster strikes, the ladder falls away and they're left stranded.

It's all head-shakingly ridiculous and while the script isn't equipped to find a believable justification as to why someone trying to get over such horrific trauma would want to do something quite so deranged, none of that really matters once we're halfway up (a point that we're chillingly reminded is the height of the Eiffel Tower). While the dodgy green screen in the cold open had me worried, despite an *astonishingly* low \$3m budget, British director Scott Mann manages to make the high-in-the-sky danger feel scarily, stomach-churningly real and if the pace allowed for it, it'd be tempting to Google just how on earth they managed it all while watching. Despite obvious VFX work (even Tom Cruise would turn down such a stunt), the joins are so hard to spot and the illusion so skillfully conjured that I found myself utterly, horribly immersed in the big dumb spectacle of it all. Spanish cinematographer MacGregor and an A-game visual effects team use the structure's perspective to breath-taking, dizzyingly queasy effect and even find time for some rather stunning standalone images, briefly transforming a B-movie into something oddly artful.

Stupidity might have got the pair up to the top but their actions once situated are grounded and satisfyingly competent, Mann and co-writer Jonathan Frank finding an impressive amount of mileage from two people stuck on a small grate with a small bag. It's a puzzle for them to solve and like the very best survival movies, it has us trying to solve it alongside, could that or would that or how about questions tidily fitting in-between the steady stream of nopes. There are two silly, derivative twists, the first incredibly easy to spot and the second incredibly easy to get annoyed with, but it's mostly a pretty straightforward against-the-odds thriller, a throwback of sorts with some slight nu-tech tweaks (who knew a selfie stick could be such a vital emergency tool?). The tension of it all is heightened even moreso by two fully committed performances from little-known actors giving it their all, trying admirably hard to sell some laughably goofy dialogue during a physically gruelling vertical obstacle course (Gardner emerges as the real standout, possessing the effervescence of a young Reese Witherspoon).

Fall is the rare three-drinks-in "what if?" elevator pitch that somehow survived the journey to the big screen, made with unusual precision and punch. Director Mann sets his sights low even as his simple, sturdy film climbs so very, very high and in doing so, delivers in a way that so few have this year, a \$3m embarrassment to the studios throwing a hundred

times more at blockbusters with a hundred times less of a thrill factor. Arriving in the dog days of summer, it's something of a marvel.

- Fall is out in US cinemas on 12 August and in the UK on 2 September