

Infinitely Polar Bear

Cam Stuart (Mark Ruffalo) is a husband and father from a wealthy but distant family who has long suffered from manic depression. “Infinitely Polar Bear” opens in 1978, just when Cam has had a manic episode that lands him in a mental hospital. His wife Maggie (Zoe Saldana) and their two young daughters, Amelia and Faith (Imogene Wolodarsky and Ashley Aufderheide), must leave their house in the country and move to a depressing apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Maggie looks for work.

After difficulty finding employment, Maggie applies to business school and is accepted for Columbia University’s MBA program, but this means she must move to New York and come home only on weekends. She reluctantly asks Cam to become the primary caregiver for the girls while she completes her studies. Cam assumes the task, but the girls test his delicate psyche. With such stress, Cam realizes that he’s in over his head but, over the course of 18 months, while Maggie earns her degree, he is gradually able to care for his bright daughters as well as for himself.

This is a family chamber piece, with autobiographical elements from the life of its writer/director Maya Forbes, a Hollywood screenwriter directing her first film. Forbes grew up in Cambridge with a manic depressive father and a mother who went to Columbia to help provide for her family. Her story depends fundamentally on whether the interaction of the troubled father and his two sharp kids is believable

As it happens, Ruffalo and the girls pull off their intricate relationship with smarts and humor, as the ever-edgy dad learns to better read his girls while they gain patience with his malady. Ruffalo, one of our consistently best character actors, is completely convincing as a manic personality, never exactly raving but ever struggling with the obsessions and ample disorder of his mind: you see where his parenting can go so wrong, yet you still root for him to succeed. Saldana is a lovely and sincere figure, though she is only a fleeting presence here. It’s the dad and his daughters who carry this heartfelt movie.

One nice biographical note: director Forbes cast her own daughter, Imogene, as the feisty Amelia, and the kid is terrific. “Polar Bear” is a family affair, indeed, since Amelia’s father, Wally Wolodarsky, is one of the movie’s producers.

(The film is rated “R” and runs 88 min.)