

Written by Mike Schulz
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THE GREY

Whenever I watch a movie such as *Alive* or *The Thing* or director Joe Carnahan's *The Grey* – especially in January – I ask myself the same question: Is it worth it? I know about cinematic sleight-of-hand, of course, and that the performers and crew aren't enduring anywhere near the nightmarish conditions suffered by the characters on-screen. I also presume that a fat Hollywood paycheck instantly makes any location shooting, including *The Grey*'s outdoor shoot in wintry British Columbia, a lot more bearable. But still, all that ice and wind and trudging through thigh-deep snow ... Is any movie experience worth spending three months in fear of losing your digits to frostbite?

In the case of Carnahan's new action thriller, the answer would appear to be "Hell, yes," though I'll admit that nothing about *The Grey*'s advance publicity hinted at anything beyond another dreary he-man adventure with Liam Neeson in his (quickly becoming stale) righteous-ass-kicker mode. In basic outline, the film concerns a team of Alaska oil workers who emerge from a devastating plane crash and are forced to contend with their murderously bitter environment and a pack of hungry, extremely territorial wolves. Between its Arctic setting and the tired familiarity of its survival-of-the-fittest narrative, with its archetypal band of hot-headed tough guys slowly learning to trust one another, I entered *The Grey* thinking it would prove to be one of the most aptly titled movies I'd ever seen. I left thinking I'd never seen anything quite like it.

During its first 10 minutes, *The Grey* paints an unexpected, rather extraordinary portrait of grief and loss, with Neeson, composing a love letter in haunted voice-over, addressing fundamental issues of life, love, and humanity. It's an eerily, shockingly meditative intro that suggests Carnahan's latest will be less reminiscent of his recent *The A-Team* reboot than Malick's

Northern Exposure: "The Grey," "Man on a Ledge," and "One for the Money"

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The Tree of Life,

but what proves utterly astonishing is that this searching and melancholic air doesn't abate once the movie gets down to the business of thrilling the bejeezus out of you. From that deeply unsettling mid-air disaster to the hostile vocal assaults to the brutal and terrifying wolf attacks, every scene is filled with both staggering intensity and exquisite empathy; you watch the proceedings with your stomach in knots, but also with a sizable lump in your throat. Carnahan's and Ian Mackenzie Jeffers' script is punchy, vibrant, and offhandedly profound, and it's acted to near-perfection by Frank Grillo, Dallas Roberts, Dermot Mulroney, Nonso Anozie, Joe Anderson, and Neeson, whose thunderous gravitas and expansive soulfulness have perhaps never been used to finer effect.

And while nothing on Carnahan's résumé, not even 2002's enjoyably vicious *Narc*, gave indication that he was capable of much in the way of wonders, I'm thinking we might be in the presence of a major director. A few elements, particularly a few too-conveniently-timed wolf appearances, may strain credibility, but Carnahan's movie is supremely well-paced and aurally evocative and gorgeously composed, and there are sequences here so powerful and damned near

at they practically take your breath away. (The scenes of Neeson gently comforting a rapidly dying man, and of an exhausted survivor facing imminent death at a tranquil lakeside, are more emotionally wrenching than any you'll find among this year's Best Picture contenders.)

The Grey

is a hugely exciting, sensationally affecting entertainment. Arriving at the tail end of what's generally the most desolate month for quality releases, it's also something of a miracle.



MAN ON A LEDGE

If you can ignore the ridiculousness of its storyline, in which a wrongfully accused thief stages a suicide threat while his brother hunts down the evidence necessary to exonerate him, you can have a fair amount of guilty-pleasure fun at *Man on a Ledge*. Boasting several ingenious caper-film conceits, Asger Leth's lightweight thriller is nimble and breezily unpretentious, and in an added perk, Pablo F. Fenjves' script is also unexpectedly funny, with Elizabeth Banks, Jamie Bell, Ed Harris, Kyra Sedgwick, and Genesis Rodriguez steadfastly, and

wisely

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, refusing to take this thing seriously. If only they shared their *modi operandi*

with Edward Burns, who gives a typically sour, unpleasant performance, and with lead Sam Worthington, who must certainly be the most vacuously inexpressive and uninteresting leading man currently working. Or has James Cameron just pulled a fast one on us, and the *Avatar*

star is secretly just a motion-capture-animated figure himself?



ONE FOR THE MONEY

One for the Money, based on the first in a series of wildly popular Janet Evanovich novels, stars Katherine Heigl as the feisty, Jersey-based bounty hunter Stephanie Plum, and I'm betting that if you threw a rock in an East Coast nail salon, you could hit five people who'd be smarter casting options. But to take some heat off the film's peevish and unamusing lead, everything about director Julie Ann Robinson's comic thriller (with both "comic" and "thriller" deserving of quotation marks) is blandly cutesy and insufferable, with Jason O'Mara delivering a flawless (i.e., unbearable) Gerard Butler impression, and the movie's only saving graces – the blessedly game Debra Monk and Debbie Reynolds – exiting less than halfway through the picture. Fuggedaboutit.

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