

Blu-ray Review: 'The Grey' Offers Liam Neeson His Best Role in Years

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on May 15, 2012 - 6:53am

- [Blu-ray Review](#) [2]
- [Cast Away](#) [3]
- [Dermot Mulroney](#) [4]
- [Frank Grillo](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Joe Carnahan](#) [7]
- [Liam Neeson](#) [8]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [9]
- [The Grey](#) [10]
- [Universal Studios Home Entertainment](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – Joe Carnahan's "The Grey" is one of the first great surprises of 2012, a thriller more interested in the inner turmoil of its characters than gratuitous bloodletting. The cynical bait-and-switch of its marketing campaign is easier to forgive considering the superior nature of the actual film. It's vastly more thoughtful and moving than one would expect.

Of course, moviegoers have every right to be disappointed if they saw "The Grey" solely on the basis of its underwhelming trailer, which showed Liam Neeson strapping broken bottles to his fists in preparation to fight a large wolf with digital features no more convincing than Taylor Lautner's pack in "Twilight." If you can get past the fact that no such brawl takes place (at least onscreen), then you will start to appreciate this film on its own merits. Nearly every person I know who had seen the film in theaters had nothing but glowing things to say about their experience, and I can't help but share their sentiment.



Blu-ray Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Though it seems like Neeson has been working more out of compulsion than passion these days, he delivers one of the best performances of his career in "The Grey," by bravely tackling a role that hits very close to home. As Ottway, an ace marksman stranded in an Alaskan wasteland, the actor plumbs emotional depths of startling poignance. It's only been three years since the sudden death of Neeson's wife, Natasha Richardson, and in the opening moments of "The Grey," a devastated Ottway reflects on the painful memories of his late wife, and the agony he feels in her absence. Much later in the film, Ottway desperately screams at the heavens, cursing God for allowing so much suffering to consume the planet. As acted by Neeson, the scene is every bit as powerful as Max von Sydow's enraged monologue in "The Virgin Spring." Yet many of the film's finest moments are its quietest ones, such as when Neeson tenderly guides a dying man toward the light by having him concentrate on his loved ones. The scene is played out in absolute silence and is refreshingly devoid of studio-approved sentimentality. It's entirely to the credit of writer/director Carnahan and co-writer Ian Mackenzie Jeffers (whose short story, "Ghost Walker," served as the film's source material) that "The Grey" refuses to take a stand on matters best left ambiguous.



Liam Neeson stars in Joe Carnahan's *The Grey*.

Photo credit: Universal Studios Home Entertainment

The film begins with the scariest plane crash set-piece since "Cast Away," as the camera remains claustrophobically confined within the cabin as it plummets toward the ground. Ottway survives along with seven of his co-workers from an Alaskan oil rig. It's poetic justice that these men would be preyed upon by the animals whose land they've been ravaging. For its first third, it looks as if "The Grey" will merely fall into the rhythms of a standard horror film where know-it-all Neeson leads a group of faceless soon-to-be victims on a journey toward inevitable death. Yet as the film progresses, the ensemble acquires intriguing dimensions. Diaz (Frank Grillo) allows his bullying persona to crumble once teamwork becomes a vital necessity for survival, while Talget (Dermot Mulroney) clings to his faith that his life was spared for a reason. The group dynamic of the humans resembles that of their furry predators, with Ottway taking on the role of the alpha male. Admittedly, the weakest aspects about the film are the wolves themselves, which are frightening only as unseen threats, but are never once convincing when placed in a live action environment. Perhaps such effects are convincing only if they're consistently on display throughout the entirety of a film's running time, as in "Rise of the Planet of the Apes." However, this film was never meant to function as a creature feature. It is a haunting, often riveting drama about men facing their own mortality, with a final, post-credits shot guaranteed to spark rounds of impassioned discussion.



"The Grey" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.40:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French and Spanish subtitles, and includes a pocket BLU app and access to the BD-Live Center. The disc's 22 minutes of deleted scenes do not, alas, offer an alternate ending, thus leaving fans to fantasize about what a Neeson/wolf brawl would actually look like (indeed, some things are better left to the imagination). Instead, there's a silly scene where Ottway's early suicide attempt is interrupted by the random appearance of a polar bear that looks primed to offer him a Coca-Cola. There's also an awkward comic montage centering on the looting of food from the plane wreckage that feels too forced, though I would've liked to see Ottway's excruciatingly prolonged attempts to light a fire kept in the final cut. It's the sort of visceral moment that truly absorbs the viewer into the character's predicament. The longest axed scene is an extended cut of the central campfire sequence where each character gets a moment to shine. This is the section of the film that succeeds in its goal to endear the audience to its ensemble, and the deleted footage gives more screen time to Dallas Roberts, who does a fine job playing one of Ottway's most reliable partners in survival.

Carnahan is joined on the audio commentary track by editors Roger Barton and Jason Hellmann, whom the director credits with much of the film's success. They note that some of the dialogue, particularly in Neeson's opening monologue, was cut in favor of silences, thus allowing the actors' eyes to do most of the talking. Though the animated wolves stick out like a sore thumb, Carnahan highlights the impressively subtle work done by Digital Dimensions to enhance the film's desolate environment. A great deal of manufactured snow was used to cover Vancouver during an unusually green winter, while some nifty in-camera effects were used to bring added intensity to various scenes. For the shot where a dreaming Ottway watches his wife vanish as snow begins to fall upon him, Neeson was placed on a dolly with a speed ramp that carried him away from the actress, while a snow machine blasted above his head. When the director says that "The Grey" is the type of movie that never tops the box office, his editors disagree with him, arguing that there is an audience for open-ended, artfully lensed, character-driven dramas. It's a better picture than all four of Carnahan's previous feature efforts put together. This might just be the beginning of a beautiful career.

'The Grey' is released by Universal Studios Home Entertainment and stars Liam Neeson, Frank Grillo, Dermot Mulroney, Dallas Roberts, Joe Anderson, Nonso Anozie, James Badge Dale, Ben Bray and Anne Openshaw. It was written by Joe Carnahan and Ian Mackenzie Jeffers and directed by Joe Carnahan. It was released on May 15, 2012. It is rated R.



[13]

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