Don’t be fooled by the trailers; THE GREY is much more than the simple man-vs.-wolf dustup those previews would lead you to believe. It’s also a heavier film than you’d expect from director/co-writer Joe Carnahan, whose last two features, THE A-TEAM and SMOKIN’ ACES, took a smirky approach to action. THE GREY is deadly serious, and seriously good.

Just be advised that while THE GREY is gripping throughout, the wolf attacks are sporadic and strategically timed, and their threat is almost secondary to the elements in which its characters find themselves stranded. (As in THE DESCENT, another thriller about a group struggling to survive a hostile environment, one of the most suspenseful scenes does not involve the predators, but rather the crossing of a dangerous chasm.) When the wolves do emerge from the snow or woods, though, Carnahan makes them a very credible, chilling menace, upping the fear factor by playing them not as monsters but as wild animals plausibly protecting their turf, and preying on easy meals. Wildlife advocates have protested this portrayal, and while it’s true that wolves generally pose no threat to humans, THE GREY is enough to have you believing that anyone who might have wound up in the frozen wilds of North America’s northernmost climes and found out otherwise didn’t live to share the information.

Certainly, John Ottway (Liam Neeson) has no compunction about shooting the beasts when they encroach on the Alaskan oil refinery where he’s been employed as a security guard. We quickly learn that he’s got beasts gnawing at him from the inside as well, leading him to almost turn his high-powered rifle on himself. He has put up a barrier between himself and the world, and that hardened exterior becomes a saving grace after a plane on which he’s flying home crashes in the middle of snowy nowhere, leaving only Ottway and a handful of his fellow workers alive to battle their way back to civilization.

Befitting its elemental storyline (and its title), Carnahan tones down the showiness of his previous films in THE GREY. Early on, there’s a marvelous, eerie shot tracking slowly and quietly down the length of the semi-darkened plane, occasional puffs of visible breath the only signs of life, and Masanobu Takayanagi’s cinematography is masterfully bleak throughout. The crash itself is hair-raising, with a stunning moment that visually ties it in with the source of Ottway’s melancholy. Then the survivors pull their way out of the wreckage, begin to take stock of the situation and realize what deep trouble they’re in. Here’s one genre film where the characters’ inability to raise a cell-phone signal plays not as a convenient gimmick but as a foregone conclusion.

Ottway becomes the natural leader of the group, and quickly realizes that a) they’re highly unlikely to be found and b) the longer they wait around, the more time they’re giving the wolves to circle. And so they set off to make it below the treeline, doing their best to fend off the cold, trying to find food—and to avoid becoming it. Tensions rise not only between the men, but between Ottway and a higher power he believes has abandoned him. As THE GREY goes on, he seems to be fighting not only for his and his fellow men’s lives, but in defiance of a world that seems to be endeavoring to crush both his body and soul.

Heady stuff for a genre film, and the script by Carnahan and Ian Mackenzie Jeffers, based on a short story by the latter, is peppered with moments in which Ottway and his compatriots voice their fears and philosophies and ruminate about their pasts. It all works because the actors (also including Frank Grillo, Dallas Roberts, Joe Anderson, Nonso Anozie, Ben Bray, James Badge Dale and an unrecognizable Dermot Mulroney) truly sell these moments, and because as in John Carpenter’s THE THING—another saga of survival in a frigid environment—a crew who at first seem like indistinguishable roughnecks gradually reveal their characters in the way they react to their plight. And they don’t often pay off the way you predict they will, nor do they die that way either. As for the wolves, they’re a scarily well-handled combo of the real thing, occasional CG work and animatronics by Greg Nicotero and Howard Berger, who also provided the grisly leftovers of their feeding frenzies.

Holding the center is Neeson, who has made a transition from quiet dramatic force to man of action in recent years, but has never had a thriller vehicle this good before, so attuned to his stengths as an actor. His performance is fully lived in, riveting and, it’s impossible not to think, colored by recent events in his real life; the awareness of them leaves one impressed not only that Neeson would tackle a scenario so similar, but by the depth with which he draws out those feelings and applies them to this onscreen role. He commands the screen whether railing against a God he believes has forsaken him, or physically taking on his lupine tormentors. Does he emerge victorious? No fair telling, but I will say this: Make sure you stay till the very end of the closing credits.