It’s been a long time since I last visited the wonderful world of Oz…probably around thirty years, in fact. But director Sam Raimi’s new film, a prequel to that great classic, The Wizard of Oz, invites us all back to that land of magic and adventure, where Wicked Witches soar through the skies on broomsticks and the forests are home to everything from lions to river faries and talking monkeys. And it’s great to be back.

Oz the Great and Powerful is the story of a carnival magician named, of course, Oz (James Franco). Oz aspires to greatness, but his life is anything but. He’s a charlatan, and not just on the stage. He has a habit of charming ladies and breaking their hearts without remorse, and treats his one friend in all the world with utter contempt. In short, he’s a loser.

But when the hot air balloon he’s in is about to be sucked up into a giant tornado (in Kansas, of course), Oz looks to the Heavens and promises to change and do really great things if only he survives. He does survive, as it turns out the tornado was his doorway to the Land of Oz. There Oz learns of a prophecy concerning a great wizard bearing the Land’s name who would liberate everyone from the Wicked Witch and rule the Kingdom with justice. Oz knows there is a problem with this: he isn’t really a wizard. But his new friends don’t know that, and for the most part they are easily impressed with his “magic” illusions. Lured by promises of kingship and untold riches, Oz sets out to achieve the greatness he always wanted. So much for his promise to change...

Oz the Great and Powerful is a great morality tale about a man’s change of heart, and about the differences between good and evil, the consequences of our actions, and the fact that greatness, however we define it, is never as important as “goodness.” James Franco delivers what is probably the best performance of his career to this point, and his portrayal of Oz is charismatic (even when the character is at his worst) and the gradual evolution of the vain young man towards maturity is effectively realized.

Franco isn’t alone in sharing the acting accolades, though. Mila Kunis, Michelle Williams, and Rachel Weisz shine as a trio of witches good and bad, with special kudos going to Kunis. Director Raimi oversees a grandly fantastic Land of Oz that virtually glows with radiant colors of every hue and picturesque woodlands, impressive castles, and powerful displays of magic (and not all of it of the harmless variety). And yes, the skies of Oz are still haunted by those most terrible icons of childhood nightmares: the flying baboons, meaner and more vicious than ever. Ugh.

Is Oz the Great and Powerful the classic that The Wizard of Oz is? Of course not. It is, however, a fine supplement to that masterpiece and a great way to introduce your kids to the Land of Oz if they haven’t been there already. It’s great fun with a great message. What more do you want? Go see it, you won’t be sorry.