As a renowned paleontologist, Kate Lloyd is used to digging things up from the earth, things that once breathed and walked but now are entombed in ice and rock. So when a Norwegian research station in Antarctica asks Kate to come out and help them excavate something they’ve found, she finds their reluctance to talk about their discovery merely eccentric. Only when she sees the thing with her own eyes does she realize the magnitude of what she is about to help unleash on an unsuspecting world, something that has hibernated for thousands of years within the icy Antarctic ground, waiting to be reborn.

Of course, The Thing 2011 is not the first movie of that moniker. The first was the semi-classic from the 1950s, starring James Arness as the title monster, followed in 1982 by John Carpenter’s big-budget remake, widely considered a classic in its own right. The new version is actually a prequel to the Carpenter film, but don’t worry about it if you haven’t seen that movie. Only a few scenes actually serve as direct ties between the two films, and in most respects our current movie can be watched as more of a remake than as one of a set.

As a stand-alone film, 2011’s movie is actually quite good. The Antarctic setting is the perfect environment for carefully constructed horror, and the isolation of our protagonists serves to create a claustrophobic, white-out nightmare in which it is surprisingly easy to believe evil could intrude without warning. Director Matthijs van Heijningen Jr manipulates setting and image to great effect, and is smart enough to realize that monsters are often scarier when they are seen less, not more. The special effects are brilliant, however, and when the title creature does reveal itself it is truly a magnificent abomination. There is a lot of blood, so squeamish viewers take note, but the physical horrors are dwarfed by the psychological ones—paranoia indeed runs deep throughout The Thing.

The cast is largely unknown, except for up-and-coming starlet Mary Elizabeth Winstead as Kate and veteran character actor Ulrich Thomsen, the leader of the scientific station who invites Kate to help out with his team’s unearthly discovery. Winstead is great as the heroine, competent but vulnerable, resolved when necessary but still scared out of her mind by the terror she is confronted with. Winstead is the heart and soul of the picture, but she gets a lot of support. Thomsen is always reliable, and the rest of the cast makes up for in solid performance what they lack in name recognition. The script is well-written and while a remake (pardon, prequel) can only be so original, the plot does take some interesting twists that should keep viewers on their toes and give them quite a few shocks.

The Thing is a welcome addition to this Halloween season and a fine addition to science fiction canon. Exciting, intelligent, and scary as well, this is one remake—or prequel—that lives up to its source material and in some ways actually improves upon it.