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Special to The Wilson Post

Despite a slow start, “The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey” is really an outstanding adventure that is likely to thrill fans of the book but presents problems for the casual moviegoer.

Directed by **Peter Jackson**, and based on **J.R.R. Tolkien’s** novel, “The Hobbit,” the film is the first of three, and tells of the hobbit Bilbo Baggins (
Martin Freeman
) and his journey with 13 dwarves and the wizard Gandalf (
Ian McKellan
).

Of course, the films opens with a prologue on how the dragon Smaug destroyed the dwarves’ homeland of Erebor and the surrounding region, setting up the film’s plot. The first 45 minutes drag on, despite the prologue showing off stunning landscapes and dwarf cities common to Middle earth.

There could have been a much more organic way to familiarize the audience with the background, especially considering the entire company of dwarves show up unannounced at Bilbo’s house for dinner to recruit him for the trip.

But once the journey gets underway, the film is fantastic and a whole lot of fun. In keeping with the book’s theme, the characters and events are light-hearted and plenty of comedy is provided by the dwarves.

Unless you are familiar with them from the book, few of the dwarves stand out besides their leader, Thorin Oakenshield (**Richard Armitage**) and Balin (**Ken Stott**). Keeping up with the

rest for the unfamiliar may be more trouble than it's worth at times.

Thorin and Bilbo are the film's two most intriguing characters to say the least. Thorin, heir to the kingdom now lost to the dragon, has a tragic past and carries a lot of weight on his shoulders. Armitage does a great job of showing the dwarf's motivations and emotions that weigh on their journey.

Freeman is spectacular as Bilbo Baggins, who grows from being annoyed about mud tracked on his carpet, to being willing to help the dwarves through any situation. His growth as a character is the whole focus and Freeman gives an outstanding performance.

All of the staples of Jackson's "Lord of the Rings" films return, with elves, and dwarves, goblins and orcs and wolf-like wargs. The landscapes are again amazing, thanks to filming in New Zealand and the work of the production crew to create the city of Erebor, which looked amazing, and the familiar Elven land of Rivendell.

The film's best sequences come when the company is captured by goblins after seeking shelter from a stone giant battle that looks awesome. Also, while captured, Bilbo escapes and meets the creature Gollum, with Andy Serkis returning to portray the creature's movements, facial expressions and voice.

Without a doubt, the interaction between Bilbo and Gollum is the best part of the film, with hilarious comedy in their game of riddles and Gollum is more creepy and disturbing than he ever was in the two "Lord of the Rings" films.

While Tolkien wrote "The Hobbit" first and then had to retroactively tie his "Lord of the Rings" novels in with that book, Jackson had to insert those connections into this first film. There's a return of several characters from the "Rings" trilogy and hints at that trilogy's villain Sauron, and of course, Bilbo finds the titular One Ring.

But, "The Hobbit" is more than just a prequel to "Lord of the Rings." The film's second half is so good, it stands alone as its own adventure thanks to the greatness of Freeman and Armitage,

the relationship between their characters and how both grow from beginning to end.

The film is not without its danger, serious perils and scary moments, but its light-hearted attitude and litany of whimsical jokes may make it more appealing to younger audiences than “Lord of the Rings,” which are undoubtedly more serious.

The film is not without its pitfalls, mostly the first half that stumbles to get the story moving. If you can survive the opening half, you will be rewarded, although the film still clocks in at almost three hours.

“The Hobbit” is now playing and is rated PG-13 with a runtime of 2 hours 49 minutes.

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