



NEW RELEASES

Nomadland

Nomadland stars Frances McDormand as a van-dwelling modern migrant worker travelling across the American West. A lyrical, anti-materialist neo-western with docudrama elements, it punctuates its melancholy with sublime images and epiphanic moments in the wilds. The movie and writer-director Chloé Zhao's previous features *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015) and *The Rider* (2017) – both set on the Oglala Lakota Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota – empathise with people who have been rendered invisible by mainstream American society.

It's tempting to locate the concern with the outsiders and itinerants found in Zhao's films in the story of her own life. Born in Beijing in 1982, Zhao attended Brighton College in England and completed high school in Los Angeles. Before enrolling in film school at New York University, she took a BA in political science at Mount Holyoke College – Emily Dickinson's alma mater – but she notes that despite her peripatetic upbringing, she's uncertain about why she has an affinity for marginalised people. 'I've been thinking about this a lot lately,' she says. 'I don't think I can pinpoint why my upbringing or experiences have made me that way, but I have always been an outsider myself; it doesn't matter where I went. I'm attracted to people who are on the periphery of society.'

That identification with those beyond the mainstream of American life finds its most expansive expression yet in *Nomadland*. The film draws from Jessica Bruder's nonfiction book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century* (2017), a journalistic immersion in the world of the expanding tribe of retirement-age people, who in the wake of the 2007-09 recession have reinvented themselves as 'workampers'. They drive around the country in their mobile homes – RVs (recreation vehicles), school buses, cars pulling trailers – and pay for their gasoline and food with their gig economy earnings, often spending their nights in parking lots. The spine of the book is Bruder's 15,000-mile, three-year trek in her own van, from 2014, following Linda May, an educated grandmother (now 70), who had worked as an insurance executive, a general contractor and a cocktail waitress, but by 2010 had become suicidal because she was terminally stuck on a low-wage treadmill. She took to the road in an RV in 2013 and discovered that nomadism liberated her, as it did many of the other older transients Bruder met, among them the Santa Claus-bearded van-dwelling guru and YouTube star Bob Wells (who set up and runs the cheapRVliving.com website) and the genealogy- and nature-loving kayaker and blogger Charlene Swankie.

After seeing *The Rider* at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival, McDormand – who had optioned Bruder's book with producer Peter Spears – enlisted Zhao to write and direct *Nomadland* in March 2018. Zhao, McDormand and other cast and crew members themselves lived in vans as they shot the film in South Dakota, Nebraska, Nevada, Northern California, Arizona and finally Southern California over the last four months of that year. Alongside McDormand and David Strathairn – the film's only other professional actor – Zhao cast May, Wells and Swankie to play themselves (in at least one case with a major biographical alteration).

‘I think it’s 50-50,’ Zhao says when asked if including real nomads in *Nomadland* was a moral principle or prompted by the need for authenticity. ‘First, I felt it was incredibly important for the van-dwellers to have a voice in the film. Jessica had done an incredible job in her book of documenting these really colourful characters with interesting life experiences and also the worlds they exist in. It’s hard to recreate that kind of thing, as I learned from making my first two films, so using real people and places was always something we were going to do. Second, I asked myself, “How will a film like this catch the attention of people today?” I was quite pragmatic about it. The idea of having a character, Fern, whose emotional arc would be something the audience could track throughout the film – and also having her be a listener and a guide to this world – was very important to me.’

Nomadland depicts a year in the life of Fern, a fictional character from the real Nevada desert village of Empire, which originated as a gypsum-mining tent city in 1923, and became a ghost town in 2011. Following the lingering death of her beloved husband Beau, the stoical sometime cashier, supply teacher and Shakespeare fan Fern is first seen shutting up her belongings in a storage unit before taking to the road in the white van that’s to be her permanent home.

To survive, she cheerfully takes seasonal jobs – at a nearby Amazon fulfilment centre, at a recreation vehicle park, at the Wall Drug Store in the South Dakota Badlands, and during Nebraska’s beet harvest. Welcomed into the nomad community, she is mentored by May, Wells, and the cancer-afflicted Swankie and hesitantly courted by David (Strathairn), a former mineworker she keeps running into and cares for when he is ill. Though Fern is played with formidable reticence by McDormand, she allows us to sense her character’s reluctance to getting closer to David, through her skittish remarks and body language when they visit the Reptile Gardens in Rapid City while working in the Badlands. Over the course of the film, she refuses three offers of immobilising herself again, as she did during her marriage, by living in what nomads call ‘sticks-and-bricks’. Zhao non-judgmentally presents a portrait of a woman whose aversion to conventional society and family life – her sister Dolly (Melissa Smith) felt abandoned by Fern when she fled home to marry Beau when she was young – is underpinned by her psychologically complex born-to-run mentality.

On her travels, Fern twice encounters an amiable young drifter, whose rootlessness remains unexplained. Most of the film’s nomads, though, are fifty-, sixty- and seventy-somethings who may have learned to embrace the van-dwelling lifestyle, for all its uncertainty, hazardousness and comparative primitiveness, but whose itinerancy stemmed originally from a tragic personal or financial loss.

‘This specific film mostly shows older people and many of them said to me, “At our age, we’ve been through one or two personal upheavals and lost people we care about”,’ Zhao says. ‘That makes the older people’s road and the younger people’s road very different experiences. Jack Kerouac’s road and Fern’s road have very different feelings. What’s so beautiful to me was hearing Bob Wells, Linda May and Swankie – and this is something I didn’t quite understand as a younger person than them – talking about that “See you down the road” idea.’ This is a belief in a spiritual as much as a literal reunion, which Wells shares with Fern when they talk, wrenchingly, about his son, who killed himself, and Beau. ‘It’s like we’re all connected by something

bigger, even though we're alone right now,' Zhao continues. 'Having carried so much loss and grief, this is such a powerful healing thing for them.'

Nomadland is a film constantly in dialogue with westerns. It not only shares their terrain, which supplied a mythic backdrop to the genre's working out of conflicts between family-based communities and businessmen, and between communities and individuals (not least drifters), but ironically recasts the relationship between migration and displacement in the West.

'I feel like the American road, that part of the country [the West], and the spirit that's in that landscape is in the people whose ancestors arrived there. They were always chasing the horizon and wondering what's beyond it. It's still there – it's a very young country.

'If I were to generalise, I'd say there are two types of nomad,' she adds. 'Some use the road as a means to an end, so that they can get back to home and stability. And the others stay on the road forever until the end. They are nomads at heart. To me, Fern is the second kind. Some of them find something that's inside them, whether it's in their bones or their blood or their ancestral DNA. They go, "Wait a minute, actually I want to move." I see that in Fern, in Johnny and in Brady.'

Graham Fuller, *Sight & Sound*, March 2021

Nomadland
Directed by: Chloé Zhao
©: 20th Century Studios
A Highwayman, Hear/Say, Cor Cordium production
Presented by: Searchlight Pictures
Produced by: Frances McDormand, Peter Spears, Mollye Asher, Dan Janvey, Chloé Zhao
Location Manager: Nathan Dudley Harrison
Local Casting: Hannah Logan Peterson, Nathan Dudley Harrison
Written for the Screen by: Chloé Zhao
Based on the book by: Jessica Bruder
Director of Photography: Joshua James Richards
Visual Effects by: The Yard VFX
Edited by: Chloé Zhao
Production Designer: Joshua James Richards
Art Director: Elizabeth Godar
Costume Designer: Hannah Logan Peterson

End Titles by: Endcrawl
Featuring the Music of: Ludovico Einaudi
Sound Designer: Sergio Díaz
Production Sound Recordist: M. Wolf Snyder
Re-recording Mixer: Zach Seivers
Additional Re-recording Mixer: Sergio Díaz
Supervising Sound Editors: Sergio Díaz, Zach Seivers

CAST
Frances McDormand (*Fran*)
David Strathairn (*Dave*)
Linda May (*herself*)
Swankie (*herself*)
Bob Wells (*himself*)
USA 2020
107 mins

A Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures UK release

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

Ammonite
From Mon 17 May
Sound of Metal
From Mon 17 May
Nomadland
From Mon 17 May
First Cow
From Fri 28 May
After Love
From Fri 4 Jun
Fargo
From Fri 11 Jun
The Reason I Jump
From Fri 18 Jun
Nashville
From Fri 25 Jun
Ultraviolence
From Sat 26 Jun
Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero and contributor Janet Alder

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