

Nomadland: A Film by Chloé Zhao

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Abstract

Nomadland is a triple Oscar winning film, starring Frances McDormand as Fern, widowed and from a dying town in Nevada, who sets out in an old camper van to join the community of nomads travelling the roads and deserts of the American west. It is a tale of mourning, of coming to terms with the past and learning to face the unknown future without the comforts and securities of American middle-class existence. It bears comparison with biblical desert wanderers like Abraham, and early Christian saints of the desert who lived in the world as pilgrims, travelling towards the future with courage and perhaps hope.

Keywords

Nomad, desert, mourning, pilgrim, McDormand

Nomadland was first shown on September 11th, 2020 at the Venice Film Festival and it went on to win three Oscars for Best Director, Best Picture and Best Actress in the 93rd Academy Awards in 2021. As best picture it was, in that Hollywood context, an unlikely but wholly worthy winner. Based on Jessica Bruder's book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century* (2017), *Nomadland* was directed by the young Chinese filmmaker Chloé Zhao and starred Frances McDormand as the central character Fern. (The film has been banned in China where Zhao is a controversial figure having described her country in 2013 as 'a place where there are lies everywhere'.) Most of the other characters in the film are played not by professional actors but by real-life nomads playing themselves. Their unselfconsciousness and authenticity serves to make the performances of the film's two professional actors, McDormand

and David Strathairn, all the more remarkable and convincing.

Never overtly so, *Nomadland* is nevertheless a deeply religious film, built upon a non-narrative accumulation of small incidents and moments of solitary reflection set against the background of the western deserts and badlands of the United States. Above all, perhaps, it is a work of mourning, loss and detachment from the settled world of middle class, capitalist and comfortable America.

It is 2011. Fern has lost her job at the gypsum plant in the Nevada town of Empire when it closes down. The town itself is dying. Fern has also been bereaved of her husband and she

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faces loss and widowhood by setting off in an old van, initially to look for work. It is bitterly cold and the depths of winter. Fern finds work as a packer in a vast Amazon centre, but it is utterly dehumanizing. Her friend Linda (beautifully played by a real-life nomad, Linda May) invites her to a meeting of travellers in Arizona where Bob Wells (also playing himself) is teaching them the art of survival on the road. Filmed without a trace of brutality, voyeurism or sentimentality, we follow Fern as she learns how to survive her solitary condition in the basics of eating, sleeping, even defecating where there is no plumbing - and gradually the building of friendships. The film beautifully catches Fern's character as an independent woman, always ready with a smile though never letting her guard down: the camera catches her in solitary moments of profound introspection and deep loneliness, only occasionally exposing her fragility as when she cannot change a flat tyre on her van. She is a woman alone.

Gradually the accumulation of moments and encounters which we see builds into a journey - a pilgrimage that is at once both internal and external. A pilgrim in a barren, though sometimes also beautiful, land, Fern only gradually learns how to express to another her deep sense of bereavement after the death of her husband. It is to the traveller Bob Wells, who has an almost priest-like role, that she can finally open up, as he too shares with her his sense of loss after the death of his son by suicide. But in the community of nomads there is never felt to be a final separation and as they pay tribute to Fern's friend and one of their number, Swankie (a character played by another nomad, Charlene Swankie), who has died of cancer, Fern and Bob affirm that they will meet their loved ones 'down the road'. It is a simple and profound moment which we can interpret as we will. But it drives Fern back to where she began, in the town Empire, finally to exorcise the ghosts of her past. But more of that later.

Nomadland offers an alternative vision of life to the settled, comfortable life of middle-class America. As she visits the home of her sister

in California, partly to borrow money to repair her broken-down van (which she insists she will repay), Fern remarks that she is not homeless just because she is 'houseless'. 'Homeless' is something else. Lingering in the background there is a biblical sense of the wandering people of the desert, living on the ultimate goodness of nature and an almost Celtic sense of existence as a pilgrimage, though with no end point in this life. Gentle in its symbolism, the film follows Fern as she gradually learns to live with nature - in one moment of intense beauty she bathes naked in a pool and the camera lingers on an image of her lying on the water, her arms outstretched as on a cross, and yet gently supported by the lake. Some may say that I am reading too much into this, and it might indeed be the case. But the film neither invites nor denies any particular reading, and so I will pursue my own while happy with others' alternatives.

There are two possible exits offered to Fern to abandon her nomadic life. The first is the return to her sister's house with its neat garden, barbeque, and comfortable, solid walls and furnishings in kitchen, living room and bedroom. She quickly falls into an argument with the 'capitalist' arguments of the men, and is seen by a young girl as the dotty, homeless aunt. Yet there is a degree of admiration in the girl as well. Fern's conversation with her sister takes place as they sit together on a comfortable bed which becomes an important image as she finally prefers her tiny, cramped sleeping quarters in her old van. For here, in suburban comfort, Fern finds no resting place for her troubled spirit.

The second possible exit comes in the shape of Dave, another nomad whom she meets during another temporary job as a camp host in the Cedar Pass Campgrounds of the Badlands National Park of South Dakota. (The film covers huge areas of the American West without filling in the journeys that each location implies. Fern is a wanderer on the face of a wide world.) Her relationship with Dave follows, to begin with, a conventional pattern as, nervously, she dances with him - two quite un-idealized, middle-aged

and lonely people. But early in their budding romance there is another profoundly symbolic moment, captured in an instance of fumbling domesticity. Dave helps Fern clear out her van and as he carries out an old cardboard box it collapses, breaking the china plates that were given to Fern by her father. She peremptorily dismisses Dave and in the next scene we see her carefully mending a plate with glue so that it appears, to us at least, as perfect again. Fern cannot let any possible future destroy the past and its memories over which she is grieving and which she still holds precious.

But this is not quite the end of the affair. Dave is taken to hospital with diverticulitis for an emergency operation and Fern continues to visit him. Later, as they are both working in yet more temporary and seedy employment (in Wall Drug in South Dakota), Dave's son visits to tell him that he will have a grandson. Dave returns to his family home and decides to remain as the grandfather figure. Here Fern visits him and for the first and only time in the film we see her neatly dressed in a skirt and, holding the sleeping baby, she looks like any other proud grandparent. But this return to a promised domesticity cannot hold her. There is more yet to be done. One night she steals away and again takes to the road in her old van, which is her true home.

Any such recital of the events of this film cannot properly enter the complex multiple levels which exist and interweave with one another. Though unassuming and understated (it was not an expensive film to make by Hollywood standards), the film is more visual than verbal, its continuity sustained in the extraordinary performance of Frances McDormand. To those around her she seems tough and independent, ready with a smile and capable of moments of laughter. But to the viewer she is also seen as intensely solitary and isolated, brooding over her past life, at first running away from the death of her husband, the loss of her home and town as Empire, Nevada disintegrates after the closure of the gypsum plant. Ultimately she is a mystery to herself, running away from one

society to find solace in another, - the alternative world of the nomadic community.

After Fern's rejection of her sister and a settled life with Dave, her wanderings lead her back to where her journeying had begun, to the desolate town of Empire. The task of mourning draws her to a final, necessary renunciation. She disposes of all her remaining property which had been kept in storage for her, saying that she no longer has need of it. Now she has nothing apart from her van. She makes one last visit to her now empty house, walking through its empty, unfurnished rooms one by one in a final act of farewell to her former domestic life with her husband. Outside, over the desolate road she (and we) look across the wide distant spaces of the desert to the mountains beyond. Earlier in the film she had remarked that outside her house there was nothing, only the desert until it reaches the mountains in the far distance. It is as if, having arrived from where she began, she knows it only now for the first time and can leave it behind, though not without hope. The past must be exorcised in the task of mourning.

And into this nothingness she disappears in her van on her endless journey. Yet we sense that for the first time she is travelling hopefully - and that is perhaps enough, though what the future holds we cannot know.

Nomadland is a film that bears many viewings. It is about many things and its viewers are guests who are invited to revise their own thinking and priorities in an embracing desert landscape that finally survives all the debris and desolations wrought by contemporary society with its yearning for settlement and belonging. During the film people are born and people die (Dave's grandchild, and Swankie, who dies of her cancer) but in the simple creed of the nomads, we shall meet them all 'down the road'. That is why they must keep journeying. God is never mentioned, but just as almost all great religions emerged from the desert, so the film has countless echoes of the Bible in the pages of which God emerges from the wilderness to deal with his people, and it is in their

wanderings in the desert lands that men and women begin to learn, often through great trials and tribulations, that the journey is more towards the future than back to the past that we hold on to so grimly. The nomads, Swankie and Bob Wells, bear some comparison to the ancient Christian mothers and the fathers of the Egyptian deserts (and their Islamic counterparts) as they, like St. Antony, leave, or are forced to leave, the comforts of home to discover that 'home' is something else than settlement, possessions and security.

At the end of the film there is an echo of Abram's wanderings in Fern's continued journeying, for to Abram, in his time, was said, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you... So Abram went... and journeyed on, still going towards the Negeb' (Genesis 12:1, 4, 9). Fern, in her turn, is also finally obedient to the call. There will be some who find this analogy fanciful, but the film is textually complex enough to entertain a variety of interpretations without unnecessary exclusions. It does for me.

Frances McDormand's Fern is a deliberately ordinary person, delineated without any concessions to Hollywood glamour or exceptional talent beyond that of resilience. But, after she has completed her painfully honest task of mourning, letting her husband and her old life go she bears also some, albeit understated, comparison

with the great Irish St. Columbanus, another traveller in the wilderness of this world who wandered around Europe in the sixth and seventh centuries. He wrote

So then, while we are on the road, as travellers, as pilgrims, as guests of the world, let us not get entangled with any earthly desires and lusts but fill our minds with heavenly and spiritual things; our theme song 'When shall I come and appear before the face of my God?'¹

Fern would never put things in this way. But she is not so far behind the great saints of old, a guest of this world, and not the least.

Nomadland is a film that repays watching with care and attention. Not all its critics praised it, some seeing it as a celebration of deprivation and even despair. I do not believe that this is the case, for it is that rare thing in the commercial world of American cinema (though its director is Chinese), a profoundly truthful study of the task of mourning and an exploration of the ancient and painful truth that when we have learnt to do with nothing, then we may begin to loosen ourselves from the shackles of the remembrance of things past and begin to face the unknown, perhaps even unknowable, future with renewed courage and hope.

¹ *Sancti Columbani Opera*. Edited, G. S. M. Walker (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), p. 97.