

# Living on thin ice: Frozen River

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28 October 2008

*Directed and written by Courtney Hunt*

*Frozen River*, the feature film debut of writer-director Courtney Hunt, is a sincere effort and a compassionate portrayal of one working class family's struggle to stay afloat. Hunt was inspired to write the work, which also takes up the issue of illegal immigration, after visiting upstate New York and hearing stories about Native American women who had begun smuggling "illegal" immigrants using the unique jurisdictional situation of the Native American reservation to transport immigrants across the US-Canadian border.



*Frozen River*

Ray Eddy

(Melissa Leo) is a working class mother living in the small town of Massena, New York situated on the US-Canadian border. Having lived for years in a dilapidated mobile home, she has promised her children a new one, a double-wide trailer for which she has not been able to come up with the full deposit. Her husband, an addict and a gambler, has abandoned the family and taken with him the rest of the money required to make the payment.

Ray works at a small retail store where she has been employed part-time for two years despite promises of full-time employment after six months on the job. Her manager, half her age, sees her as an "uncommitted" short-timer. Her eldest son offers to find a job of his own to help the family make ends meet, but Ray insists he stay focused on his education.

The family scrapes by eating popcorn for some meals—"just until I get my check"—and Ray searches through couch cushions to find spare change for her children's lunch money at school. Bit by bit, the rent-to-own companies are repossessing their belongings.

In the course of searching for her husband on a nearby Mohawk reservation, Ray meets Lila (Misty Upham), a smuggler of undocumented immigrants. At first horrified by the prospect of transporting immigrants, Ray will reconsider, under the enormous weight of her financial burdens, and choose to join Lila on her dangerous smuggling runs across the frozen St. Lawrence River in the hopes of securing the new home for her children.

*Frozen River* is a moving work. Courtney Hunt seems a sensitive and thoughtful artist, particularly adept at portraying the inner workings and relationships of the family at the center of her film and the effect of economic hardship on those relationships.

Melissa Leo turns in a strong performance, and James Reilly, who portrays Ray's youngest son, is an endearing presence. There is a great deal about the film that feels honest and authentic. The necessary attention has been paid to seemingly small but ultimately meaningful details, and the camera of Hunt and cinematographer Reed Morano lingers just long enough on the right things—a face, the interactions between two children—to allow us time to think about what's playing out before our eyes.

It must be said, however, that while the film is often moving, there are times when the drama doesn't quite involve us as it should and certain sequences feel strained or forced. A stand-off between mother and son near the picture's end introduces an element of melodrama into an otherwise serious-minded and even understated work. There is perhaps an issue here of Hunt not trusting her own material to make its impact on viewers. Attempts to deal with racism, or Ray's fears

that two Pakistani immigrants may be linked to terrorism, are inadequately explored, though her suspicions in the latter case have devastating consequences, which have their effect on both Ray and the viewer.

The film's treatment of the smuggling ring also has its benefits and drawbacks. One doesn't get to spend much time with the immigrants themselves. With some exceptions, they are mostly seen getting into and out of Ray's car, but little more.

It does, in its own way, make for an ominous and disturbing portrait of an ugly profit-making enterprise. Immigrants, Lila tells Ray, must pay great sums to the smugglers for helping them find a way into the country. This is money they don't have, so they must work off their debt to the smugglers. In one scene, a brutal smuggler takes the shoes of two immigrants before they climb into the trunk of Ray's car, so they can't run and avoid paying their debt.

These human beings are faceless merchandise to be bought and sold, and it is unsettling to see them forced in and out of the trunks of cars, ushered from one place to another, always at the mercy of their smugglers. But one wonders if there hasn't been something essential lost in this limited portrayal of their story. A more complete depiction of their struggles would have strengthened the film.

Budgetary constraints have no doubt limited the scope of Hunt's work; this is a "small film" made with handheld digital cameras. And there is also the need to preserve a balance in the storytelling and not spread oneself too thin. This is, after all, Ray's story. But there are also missteps one shouldn't ignore.

There are moments, for example, when Hunt attempts to show the experience of Ray, Lila and the immigrants as a shared one. She does so through the use of motherhood which is, of course, "timeless" and stretches "across borders." Ray, Lila, and one of the Pakistani immigrants are all mothers and they all find themselves trying to save something in the others' lives.

This approach is somewhat weak. Ray and the immigrants are most certainly in the same boat, so to speak, and Hunt is right to suggest as much. The fundamental similarity between them, however, is not their shared experience as mothers, in a nebulous "universal" sense, but their shared role as victims of the profit system and its prison-house of nation-states.

*Frozen the River* extends that important questions, it does so less fatally than some other recent works. Whatever its weaknesses, its strengths lie in the vivid and concrete images of the homes and workplaces of working class families, the stories told in certain faces and the not-so-very-small matter of what it takes to put food on one's table.

Millions of people find themselves living in conditions similar to those of Ray's family. It's time their stories made their way onto our cinema screens. *Frozen River* is an incomplete but worthy attempt.



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