

# Gus Van Sant's *Promised Land*: A deal with the devil?

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*Directed by Gus Van Sant, written by Dave Eggers, Matt Damon and John Krasinski*

*Promised Land*, directed by Gus Van Sant and co-written and featuring Matt Damon, portrays the conflict between a fictional energy company and residents of a small Pennsylvania town over whether “fracking” will be allowed in their community.

People living in various parts of the US, including many rural areas in decline for decades, have been assaulted in recent years by energy companies seeking to extract natural gas and oil using the process known as high volume hydraulic fracturing—or simply “fracking.”

Using a combination of technologies, immense quantities of natural gas can be extracted from bedrock formations hitherto effectively inaccessible to conventional techniques. The process has severe environmental and health consequences, and the long-term economic benefits are largely illusory.

In order to gain access for drilling, energy companies have mounted concerted campaigns to exploit the desperate conditions of small farmers and associated populations pushed to the edge of financial ruin, or beyond. *Promised Land*'s screenplay was co-written by Damon and John Krasinski, one of the lead actors in television's *The Office*. The two play the principal protagonists as well. The film also stars Frances McDormand as Damon's associate. Van Sant (*Drugstore Cowboy*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *To Die For*, *Elephant*) previously directed Damon in *Good Will Hunting* (which the latter also co-wrote).

Steve Butler (Damon), an up-and-coming field representative of Global Crosspower Solutions, along with his side-kick Sue Thomason (McDormand), is dispatched to a town in Pennsylvania to secure gas drilling leases from the locals—an assignment the pair

has carried out many times before. Steve grew up on a farm and uses his “down home” credentials to build rapport with the residents. He feels he is offering them a way out of conditions he experienced first-hand as a child, when the Caterpillar plant in his hometown closed and left the community devastated.

Initially, everything goes as planned. The first people to meet Butler and Thomason have apparently heard of the lucky individuals whose homes sat on rich deposits of natural gas. “You could be a millionaire,” Butler tells them as they eagerly sign away their property for low prices and the promise of a percentage of future profits.

Steve is so successful at closing such deals that he has just been promoted to a senior corporate position at Global. His certainty in the uprightness of his actions is apparently unshaken by the tools of his trade: dishonesty, coercion and bribery of local officials. He is, however, taken aback when he meets significant opposition at a town meeting, especially after having bought the cooperation of the head of the town council for \$30,000.

The resistance is led by elderly science teacher Frank Yates (Hal Holbrook). The latter, who turns out to be a retired Boeing engineer, has done his homework and is quite knowledgeable about the harmful effects of fracking. Many of those in attendance at the meeting share his views. Steve, the veteran of many such campaigns, is left somewhat unexpectedly speechless at encountering sophisticated opposition.

At Yates' urging, the town decides to delay a vote on the issue for a few weeks so that the residents can educate themselves on the matter without being pushed into a decision by a corporate salesman.

Soon thereafter, environmentalist Dustin Noble (John Krasinski) rolls into town. He inflames local opinion

against Global with horror stories about the consequences of fracking. As more and more of the residents start to resent the energy firm's plans and Butler's small-town charm falls away, his job suddenly becomes much more difficult.

That a major plot twist is coming can certainly be sensed by the viewer, although its exact nature isn't clear. While that twist tends to stretch credulity, a larger issue is Butler's easily anticipated reaction.

In any event, *Promised Land* unquestionably has its strong points. Damon and Krasinski have written and acted with noticeable intelligence and sensitivity. The film doesn't pander to banalities and clichés in a manner one has come to expect recently from Hollywood creations.

The filmmakers obviously have an affinity, which informs the movie's entire approach, for the rustic lifestyle of the town's inhabitants. This has led them to *attempt* a nuanced and realistic portrayal of the Pennsylvania locals. The latter are not bumpkins, there are real divisions among them and the viewer has some basis for understanding both sides of the argument.

Moments in the film suggest the pressing realities. In a barroom confrontation, Steve tells several local farmers that he's offering enough money so that whatever life throws at them, they can tell the world "fuck you." He gets a punch in the face for his trouble. The farmers are insulted that Steve thinks their way of life is for sale and consider that he, coming from a farm family, has betrayed his heritage.

One leaves the film with the impression that whatever the town's final decision, the possible consequences of fracking are serious enough to be debated in a thorough and democratic fashion.

*Promised Land* has significant weaknesses, however. The film is ostensibly about the conflict between the prospect of easy money held out by the energy companies and the potential damage caused by hydrofracking. But the presentation of both the economic plight of the local people and the dangers of fracking to their health and environment is too superficial. Perhaps Damon and Krasinski assumed that audiences would already be familiar with the arguments. In their attempt to avoid moralizing or didacticism, they end up only alluding in passing to the underlying issues.

As a consequence, the work leaves the impression

that the clash is primarily between greed, treated abstractly, and an idyllic way of life. By the film's own tacit admission, however, the latter is doomed, having been crushed by agribusiness and the effects of the current economic crisis, which hit just as the fracking boom was getting under way.

As it stands, the same impulse that led the filmmakers to *not* caricature the town's dwellers in a negative fashion at their moment of truth leads to the opposite result by *Promised Land*'s conclusion: the ennobling idealization of people who resist greed and send an energy giant packing.

While one does not wish for a heavy-handed polemic, a greater involvement with the real dilemmas faced by such rural communities would be necessary for a more emotionally and intellectually satisfying film.

Much valuable time is also wasted on the obligatory Hollywood love story—a rivalry over a local girl between Steve and an environmental activist. In the end, this accomplishes nothing except to weaken the film's impact.

Ultimately, we are left with the personal epiphany of Steve, who, with growing qualms about the morality of what he is doing, is pushed over the edge by an unscrupulous maneuver on the part of his employer. *Promised Land* raises complex issues that it cannot follow through on satisfactorily. It is a well-intentioned, but fairly shallow treatment of the real economic and environmental crisis facing many rural communities across the US. Having made a strong case that such communities are in terminal decline, the film's ending is too narrow and limited to bear the weight of its criticisms.



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