

Leave No Trace: An Iraq War veteran looks to leave the world behind

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6 September 2018

Directed by Debra Granik; co-written by Granik and Anne Rosellini, based on the book by Peter Rock

In sharp contrast to the banal products Hollywood offers audiences this time of year, *Leave No Trace* from director Debra Granik (*Winter's Bone*, 2010) is a worthwhile and recommendable film. Its point of departure is not super-heroes or other tired fantasy franchises but reality, in particular the lives of perhaps the most marginalized people in American society today, the homeless.

In a park outside Portland, Oregon, Will (Ben Foster), an Iraq War veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), lives in a makeshift encampment in the woods with his 13-year-old daughter, Tom (Thomasin McKenzie). The film's title is borrowed from the conservation principle that encourages campers to minimize the impact of their presence on nature.

Will and Tom grow their own vegetables, collect rainwater and pass the time reading books and playing chess. They have no interactions with other people and deliberately conceal themselves in a large public park.

Fortunately, Granik does not descend into prettifying or idealizing survivalism, or for that matter, poverty. While Will obviously cares for and looks after his daughter, and the pair live in picturesque surroundings, it is clear that this sort of "lifestyle" is not chosen willingly.

To procure food and supplies, Will and Tom go to the Veteran Affairs (VA) office in Portland for assistance. The only help they receive from the VA takes the form of painkillers, which Will then sells to other homeless veterans. In a homeless encampment in the city, with a tattered American flag in the background, one veteran says to Will something to the effect, "These pills don't do anything anyway, but I can get rid of them for you if

you want."

These scenes and others ring true, conveying a sense of the misery and desperation experienced by this section of the US population.

Eventually, Tom and Will's "home" is accidentally come upon by a jogger who alerts the authorities. Father and daughter are arrested by police and placed in a shelter. Luckily, they are given shelter in a rural part of the state, on a tree farm, on condition that Will accepts the rules of the house and works packaging pine trees.

These sequences are especially effective. Will and Tom are now placed in a prefab home with all the essential amenities, a far cry from their previous rustic settings. He refuses to watch television, and one can feel his boredom and restlessness begin to set in—although why Will feels alienated is never fully or concretely dramatized.

Tom, on the other hand, adapts to her new surroundings and begins socializing with kids her own age in the local 4H club, a farming organization for rural youth. Granik's camera work is slow and gentle, the dialogue is sparse and the action is generally subdued. All this is fine and welcome up to a point.

The rural community in which Tom and Will find themselves has a church with older members who twirl flags set to music as part of a choreographed dance routine. Is the director treating the scenes of these religious devotees with ironic detachment? This too is never clearly spelled out.

Will eventually informs Tom they have to leave, and the two hit the road, hitchhiking north. At a truck stop, Will asks drivers for a lift and meets a man who is willing to take them, but first asks to speak with Tom alone. "If you are in any kind of trouble, now is the time to tell me," he says to her. She says no, and the

three go on their way.

The same driver explains, almost in passing, that many people in the area have gotten themselves hooked on opiates and notes the devastation it has caused for so many families and communities. The scene provides a rare glimpse of life in America.

Without giving away too much, the remainder of the film sees Tom and Will try once more to return to “civilization,” with the daughter prepared to give such a life a chance while her father continues to struggle with social interaction.

It seems reasonable to ask: Why is Will running away from the world? Why do human beings in the second decade of the twenty-first century find themselves forced to survive in the woods with no food or shelter?

Granik’s approach to these questions feels a little noncommittal—there are suggestions that something is deeply wrong with the lives of these characters. Homelessness, drug addiction, never-ending war, these would all make for good jumping-off points for critical discussion and dramatic art, but Granik prefers to pass over them enigmatically. As a result, despite its good intentions, *Leave No Trace* feels as though it is lagging behind the times.

In a letter posted by Landmark Theatres, Granik writes, “As I worked on *Leave No Trace* ...the USA was going through enormous changes. Acrimony among communities that have been pitted against one another in order to advance the interests of our greediest corporations and individuals was steadily dismantling the last vestiges of national discourse about everything crucial to human existence. ...

“Working on this film was a powerful antidote to the depressing politics of our time. ... On most days making this film felt like hiding out with truly good people, with a little distance from the dark days of a new regime.”

In the same letter, she explains further on: “But right now, it seems that stories that rely on direct threats of violent bodily harm, annihilation, and high-stakes crimes are what get almost all the attention. I’m curious about our appetite for stories that don’t rely on violent actions but still have strong resonance.”

Granik, like many in her artistic milieu, is no doubt sincerely opposed to Donald Trump and the political and artistic status quo. Unfortunately, at this point, “opposition” still tends to signify support for the

equally reactionary Democratic Party. That the filthiness of both Trump and his opponents represents the extremely advanced decay of American capitalism is not something that many artists yet see, even the most sensitive. Hence the vagueness here of the conceptions at play: conformity versus nonconformity, sustainability versus ecological destruction, and so on.

The times call for precise and daring works that call things by their right name.

Having said all that, *Leave No Trace* is a genuinely healthy antidote to the current crop of commercial films that desensitize and insult our collective intelligence. A humane and compassionate film, Granik’s work deserves a wide audience.

“I wonder about this inequality and how it’s impacting on my country”—*Winter’s Bone* director Debra Granik speaks to the WSWS
[5 October 2010]

An Ozark noir: *Winter’s Bone*
[29 June 2010]



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